

YUUMIKAN

Illustration by KOIN

KANADE'S STATS

Kanade

Lv46
HP 335/335
MP 290/290
STR 151

Bofuri

I Don't
Want to Get
Hurt, so I'll
Max Out My
Defense.

7

Equipment

Headband: Life Eater
Wrath Wrath Wall: Soul Syph
Bloodstained Skull: Soul Eater
Bloodstained Bone Armor: De
Robust Ring
Impregnable Ring
Defense Ring

Equipment

Living Wisdom: Ak
Diamond Newsboy Cap
Heart Coat VI
Leggings VIII
Boots VI
Earrings
Hoyring

Welcome to
NewWorld Online.



Bofuri *Don't Want to Get Hurt, so*
Knock Out My Defense. ★



CHROME

Chrome's STATS

Lv73
HP 940/940
MP 52/52
[STR 130]
[VIT 180]
[AGI 30]
[DEX 30]
[INT 20]

KANADE

Kanade's STATS

Lv46
HP 335/335
MP 290/290
[STR 15]
[VIT 10]
[AGI 70]
[DEX 50]
[INT 110]



SALLY

Maple's partner. Can dodge anything.

KANADE

Genius mage with an unusual memory.

MAI

Yui's older sister. New player with a strength build.

YUI

Mai's little sister. New player with a strength build.

MAPLE

Tankiest guild master. No attacks damage her.

KASUMI

Katana wielder who's a skilled solo player.

IZ

High-rank crafter. Keeps Maple Tree supplied.

CHROME

Great shielder with survival skills. Party guardian.

During the seventh event



KANADE'S STATS

CHROME'S STATS

Chrome

Lv73 HP 940/940
MP 52/52

[STR 130] [VIT 180]
[AGI 30] [DEX 30]
[INT 20]

Bofuri
★ I Don't
Want to Get
Hurt, so I'll
Max Out My
Defense.

YUUMIKAN

Illustration by KOIN



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Bofuri: I Don't Want to Get Hurt, so I'll Max Out My Defense., Vol. 7

YUUMIKAN

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ITAINO WA IYA NANODE BOGYORYOKU NI KYOKUFURI SHITAITO OMOIMASU. Vol. 7

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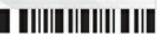
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so I'll Max Out My Defense.

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0850 1048 4070 7603

NewWorld Online Status

NAME **Maple**

Maple

LV **54**

HP 200/200 MP 22/22

STATUS

STR 000 VIT 13710 AGI 000 DEX 000 INT 000

EQUIPMENT

New Moon: Hydra

Night's Facsimile: Devour

Bonding Bridge

Black Rose Armor: Saturating Chaos

Toughness Ring

Life Ring

SKILLS

Shield Attack Sidestep Deflect Meditation Taunt Inspire HP Boost (S) MP Boost (S)
Heavy Body Green's Grace Great Shield Mastery VI Cover Move IV Cover Pierce Guard Counter
Quick Change Absolute Defense Moral Turpitude Giant Killing Hydra Eater Bomb Eater
Sheep Eater Indomitable Guardian Psychokinesis Fortress Martyr's Devotion Machine God
Bug Urn Curse Zone Freeze Pandemonium I Heaven's Throne Nether Nexus



6892 1179 0606 0847

NewWorld Online Status

NAME **Sally**

Sally

LV **52**

HP 32/32 MP 130/130

STATUS

STR 100 VIT 000 AGI 170 DEX 045 INT 060

EQUIPMENT

Deep Sea Dagger

Seabed Dagger

Surface Scarf: Mirage

Oceanic Coat: Oceanic

Oceanic Clothes

Charnel Boots: One Step in the Grave

Bonding Bridge

SKILLS

Gale Slash Defense Break Inspire Down Attack Power Attack Switch Attack
Combo Blade V Martial Arts VII Fire Magic III Water Magic III Wind Magic III Earth Magic II
Dark Magic II Light Magic II Strength Boost (M) Combo Boost (M) MP Boost (M) MP Cost Down (M)
MP Recovery Speed Boost (M) Poison Resist (S) Gathering Speed Boost (S) Dagger Mastery IX
Magic Mastery III Affliction VII Presence Block III Presence Detect II Sneaky Steps I Leap IV
Quick Change Cooking I Fishing Swimming X Diving X Shearing Superspeed
Ancient Ocean Chaser Blade Jack of All Trades Sword Dance Shed Skin Web Spinner VI
Ice Pillar Subzero Domain Nether Nexus

I Don't Want to Get Hurt, so I'll Max Out My Defense.
Welcome to NewWorld Online.



NAME **Chrome** HP 940/940 MP 52/52

LV **73**

STATUS

STR 130 VIT 180 AGI 030 DEX 030 INT 020

EQUIPMENT

Headhunter: Life Eater Wrath Wraith Wall: Soul Syphon
Bloodstained Skull: Soul Eater Bloodstained Bone Armor: Dead or Alive
Robust Ring Impregnable Ring Defense Ring

SKILLS

Thrust Elemental Blade Shield Attack Sidestep Deflect Great Defense Taunt Bulwark
Impregnable Stance Iron Body Heavy Body HP Boost (L) HP Recovery Speed Boost (L) MP Boost (M)
Green's Grace Great Shield Mastery X Defense Mastery X Cover Move X Cover Pierce Guard Guard Aura
Counter Defensive Formation Guardian Power Great Shield Secrets VI Defense Secrets V Stun Resist (L)
Paralyze Nullification Poison Nullification Sleep Nullification Freeze Nullification Burn Resist (L)
Mining IV Gathering VII Shearing Spirit Light Indomitable Guardian Battle Healing Reaper's Mire



NAME **Iz** HP 100/100 MP 100/100

LV **58**

STATUS

STR 045 VIT 020 AGI 080 DEX 210 INT 065

EQUIPMENT

Blacksmith Hammer X Alchemist Goggles: Faustian Alchemy
Alchemist Long Coat: Magic Workshop Blacksmith Leggings X
Alchemist Boots: New Frontier Potion Pouch Item Pouch Black Gloves

SKILLS

Strike Crafting Mastery X Crafting Secrets VI Enhance Success Rate Boost (L) Affliction III
Gathering Speed Boost (L) Mining Speed Boost (L) Crafting Quantity Boost (S) Crafting Speed Boost (M)
Keen Sight Sneaky Steps V Smithing X Sewing X Horticulture X Synthesizing X Augmentation X Mining X
Cooking X Gathering X Swimming VI Diving VII Shearing Godsmith's Grace X Observer's Eye



NAME **Kanade** HP 335/335 MP 290/290

LV **46**

STATUS

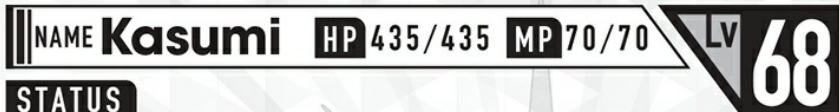
STR 015 VIT 010 AGI 070 DEX 050 INT 110

EQUIPMENT

Divine Wisdom: Akashic Records Diamond Newsboy Cap VIII
Smart Coat VI Smart Leggings VIII Smart Boots VI
Spade Earrings Mage Gloves Holy Ring

SKILLS

Magic Mastery VII MP Boost (M) MP Cost Down (M) MP Recovery Speed Boost (L) Fast Chant
Magic Boost (S) Green's Grace Fire Magic V Water Magic III Wind Magic VII Earth Magic V
Dark Magic III Light Magic VI Sorcerer's Stacks Reaper's Mire



STR 190 VIT 080 AGI 090 DEX 030 INT 030

|| Yukari, the All-Consuming Blight || Cherry Blossom Barrette
 || Cherry Blossom Vestments || Edo Purple Hakama || Samurai Greaves
 || Samurai Gauntlets || Gold Obi Fastener || Cherry Blossom Crest

SKILLS

Gleam	Helmsplitter	Guard Break	Sweep Slice	Eye for Attack	Inspire		
Attack Stance	Katana Arts X	Cleave	Throw	Power Aura	HP Boost (L)	MP Boost (M)	
Attack Boost (M)	Poison Nullification	Paralyze Nullification	Stun Resist (L)	Sleep Resist (L)			
Freeze Resist (M)	Burn Resist (L)	Longsword Mastery X	Katana Mastery X	Longsword Secrets IV			
Katana Secrets IV	Mining IV	Gathering VI	Diving V	Swimming VI	Leap VII	Shearing	Keen Sight
Indomitable	Sword Spirit	Dauntless	Sinew	Superspeed	Ever Vigilant		



STR 375 VIT 000 AGI 000 DEX 000 INT 000

Black Annihilammer VIII
Black Doll Dress VIII
Black Doll Tights VIII
Black Doll Shoes VIII
Little Ribbon
Silk Gloves

SKILLS Double Stamp Double Impact Double Strike Attack Boost (M) Hammer Mastery VII
Throw Farshot Conqueror Annihilator Giant Killing



STR 375 VIT 000 AGI 000 DEX 000 INT 000

White Annihilammer VIII
White Doll Dress VIII
White Doll Tights VIII
White Doll Shoes VIII
Little Ribbon
Silk Gloves

SKILLS Double Stamp Double Impact Double Strike Attack Boost (M) Hammer Mastery VII
Throw Farshot Conqueror Annihilator Giant Killing

Throw Farshot Conqueror Annihilator Giant Killing Max Out My Defense.

Welcome to *New World Online*.



Prologue

Kaede Honjou (aka Maple) had been invited to play the VRMMO *NewWorld Online* by her friend Risa Shiromine (aka Sally). Together, they explored the vast maps of the game world.

The newest map—the sixth stratum—was a horror zone. Sally was *not* good with anything scary. She'd tried exploring solo once, and it had gone all kinds of wrong, so she was avoiding the new floor altogether.

But in due time, the seventh event began. This involved climbing a tower dungeon, and Maple thought this was the perfect chance for them to play together again. She and Sally joined forces to conquer the ten-story tower together.

Their goal: reach the top floor without taking any damage.

Clearing the tower on the highest difficulty would earn them medals that could be exchanged for event-exclusive rewards. Combined with the medals they'd received in the fourth event, they should be able to purchase some nifty new skills. And taking no damage at all had been their goal ever since they first formed a party. They stepped into the tower well and truly motivated.

The monsters they found on the first floor were definitely befitting of the difficulty level. Each monster was tricky enough to slow the girls down—but never stood a chance of defeating them.

The boss was a sand dragon, with a breath attack as strong as its body blows. They were supposed to defeat it using exploding rocks, but Maple gathered a bunch of them and jumped into the monster's mouth, leaving it helpless to defeat her. The dragon's exterior was hard, but its interior was squishy—that was always intended to be the point, but Maple's approach did a *lot* more damage than the designers had expected.

Having cleared the first floor in one shot, they came back ready to do the same on the second. Where the first floor had been stone-walled corridors, the

second was all towering shelves, stuffed with books—and many of the monsters were shaped like books, too. These used a lot of binds and proved to be a very different kind of threat. But trapping players wasn't an effective tactic if the monsters couldn't actually do damage. Maple's Martyr's Devotion kept Sally safe, and no ordinary monster could get through that.

The boss, however, was a different story. This giant book was not messing around, and it kept stealing their skills, forcing them to retreat.

But the skills it stole from Maple were pretty risky. If anyone else was to use them, there would be a steep penalty—and Sally exploited that to secure their victory.

Each girl had cleverly turned a boss's gimmick against them: Maple on the first floor and Sally on the second. They still had a solid number of skill uses left, so they headed straight on up to the third floor.

They hoped to clear this floor in one attempt, too.



Defense Build and Tower's Third Floor

As they reached the top of the stairs, they found themselves in a comparatively open area. Walls of natural rock were lit by the red glow of molten lava.

"They're certainly providing variety, Sally."

"Yep. Guess it's not *all* corridors. Seems like there are a few obvious paths, though."

"Let's start knocking them out, then."

Sally was still taking stock of their surroundings, but Maple ventured a step forward.

And a jet of lava shot out from underneath, burning her foot.

Maple's HP bar *budged*.

"Ah...!"

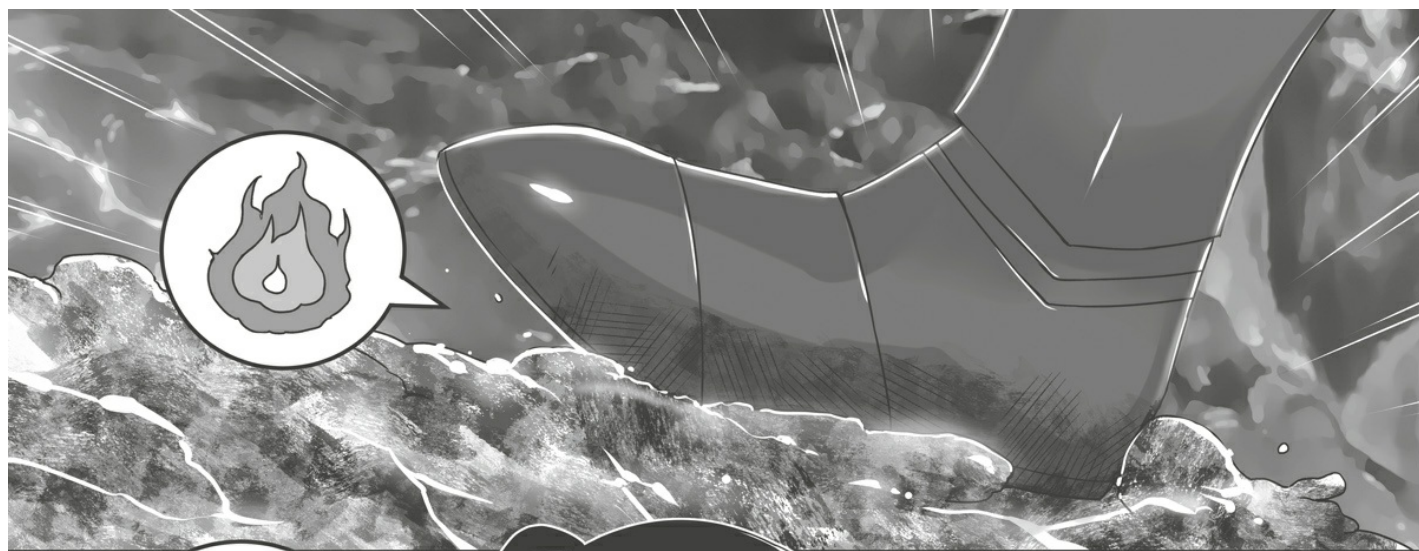
Neither of them moved an inch.

A second later, Maple's mind rebooted, and she jumped back, scrambling to Sally's side.

"Why? How?!" she wailed.

"Uh...Maple, check your skills!"

The second-floor boss had stolen a *bunch* of Maple's skills, so this was worth checking—but the screen showed her full list once more.



“Er, um...they’re all here! Full defense!”

“Huh. Um...okay, deep breaths.”

Taking her own advice, Sally took a deep breath, nodded to herself, and realized this was actually pretty straightforward.

“I bet this is one of those damage floors. Fixed damage that ignores your defense. I suppose we should have thought of that; they’re pretty standard with volcano zones.”

“It did...20 damage. Sally, you’ll probably have to avoid them outright.”

“Yeah. That would definitely hurt. But look closer, Maple.”

Sally was pointing at the floor—the same spot that had hurt Maple.

The ground was cracked. And the cracks had a faint red glow—the lava beneath.

A clear warning.

“Oh...if I’d been looking for it, I could have avoided it.”

“And if we’re anywhere narrow, we’ll have to watch the walls as well. Which just leaves what kind of monsters this place is going to throw at us...”

Maple listened intently, but something jogged her memory, and she looked crestfallen.

Their whole goal had been to clear this tower *without* taking damage.

“Awww...I took damage. And after we got through two bosses with no issues...”

“Hmm. Then let’s just say terrain and traps don’t count? I mean, technically—they ain’t monsters.”

Sally’s grin suggested she knew that was a dubious compromise, and Maple screwed her eyes closed and made all kinds of thinking noises.

“Hngg...all right! They don’t count! Let’s just try not to take monster damage. But I *will* watch my step from here on out.”

Maple switched to her black gear, looking motivated again.

“Okay. Then let’s move out! Doesn’t seem like there’re any monsters around here.”

“It’s nice to have a clear view!”

“My eyes are peeled, and I won’t miss a single foe.”

Once again, they ventured out onto the third floor.

Maple was very focused on the ground, so Sally was watching their surroundings.

There were three paths in front of them, but they could see nothing but rock walls in all directions.

“What do you think, Maple?”

“...I bet if we took the middle path, that would give us the best chance of keeping an eye on the other two.”

“Then let’s take that one!”

Maple hefted her shield and made sure Sally was in Cover Move range.

Avoiding the lava traps, they moved down the path until it opened up again.

“Stop, Maple. Something’s here.”

“Mm?” Maple said, putting a hand to her brow and peering ahead. “Oh, I see it. With all the lava pouring out of the walls, it’s hard to spot. Hmm, these aren’t like the lava birds from the first floor.”

They were definitely avian monsters, each about a yard long, with molten rock dripping from their wings.

And these lava birds seemed to spawn in the lava jets on the walls, so there was no way to stop more from coming.

“Odds are the stuff dripping off them does fixed damage, too. Careful you don’t get any on you.”

“Got it. If it comes close, I’ll do *this*!”

Maple held up her shield like an umbrella.

They conferred and decided to take a run at one. When the moment was

right, they shot forward.

“Ice Pillar... Hngg?!”

Sally had used her skill to try and get above the lava bird, but she quickly canceled that plan.

The pillar had melted as soon as it formed, leaving her with no foothold.

“No ice, huh? What about water?”

Sally hit the lava bird with a water spell, and the molten surface turned black, hardening. Unable to fly, it crashed to the ground in front of Maple.

“Weak to water! But I don’t have any... Uh, Full Deploy! Commence Assault!”

Maple turned her artillery toward the downed bird, unleashing a volley of bullets. It was just a trash mob, so it didn’t hold out long.

“And the one above!”

Maple turned her sights upward, but her bullets hit the bird and went right out the other side.

“Wh-what? It’s not working!”

“Guess we’ve got to hit ’em with water first. I’ll down ’em for you!”

“Please!”

Any birds that hit the ground never flew again.

These might be nothing like the enemies on the floors below, but once the girls had figured out how they worked, they were evenly matched.

After easily dispatching the entire molten flock, they took another look around.

Lava was flowing down the walls like waterfalls, illuminating the sides and the ceiling.

Maple bent down by a lava pool, gazing at the sea of molten rock before her.

She didn’t feel any particular urge to try touching it, but this was a sight you could never see this close up in the real world, and the bubbling magma flow intrigued her.

“It’s definitely out of this world. I guess we can take a minute to admire.”

Sally kept one eye on their surroundings but joined Maple in savoring the views of the game world.

The lava falls churned endlessly, filling the molten pond—like a volcanic crater. In theory, this was but one floor in a tower, but the ceiling was obscured by smoke and heat haze—too blurry to get a clear look. *An impossible view in an impossible locale—half the appeal of NWO*, Sally thought.

And that brought pleasures that simply clearing a dungeon never could.

“Wonder what the fourth floor’ll be like?”

“Seems like there’s no info available yet. But based on this floor, it won’t all be narrow corridors. Let’s hope you can take Syrup for a spin.”

“That would be nice! And I’d definitely like it better if the floor can’t hurt you.”

This clearing was one thing, but the paths led them through areas where giant Syrup’s bulk just couldn’t fit. And with flight not an option, they had to pick their way along, watching every step.

But as their thoughts got ahead of them, a new bird popped out of the lava flow—reminding them they were in a combat zone.

Maple spotted it and tore her eyes away from the molten lava pool, pointing at it.

“Augh, Sally! A new bird!”

“Ignore it. Let’s go... Maple!”

“Mm? Yikes!”

Maple turned her eyes back to the nearby lava lake and saw a fish monster crawling out—its burning scales melting off. It immediately hurled a lump of molten rock her way.

She reflexively yanked her shield up, and Devour safely swallowed the incoming rock.

The monster splashed out of the lake, flinging its yard-long burning body at

Maple—and vanishing into her shield.

“Th-that got me good...”

“Same. I was all focused on the bird... Sorry, that was too close.”

“It’s all good. But we’d better hurry before anything else spots us.”

Maple got up and backed away, eyes on the lava lake’s surface. Then she ran toward the nearest exit.

“.....That shield’s so *good*!” Sally muttered, impressed anew.

With all the new tricks at her disposal, Maple didn’t fall back on Devour nearly as often, but it remained the perfect match for her build. It swallowed up everything, making it great not only in combat but also for remaining unharmed in emergency situations like the moment before.

“There’s a passage!”

“I see it!”

They made it into the passageway without the birds spotting them and paused to catch their breath.

“Whew...can’t really stop to smell the lava, huh?” Maple said, keeping an eye on the passage behind them. “No telling what monsters’ll come at you!”

The passage had fewer places for monsters to hide and was probably safer than the open areas.

“The higher we go, the trickier the monsters’ll get. More of ’em’ll have a gimmick to them, so look out for piercing attacks or fixed damage. And, like, recovery seals.”

Sally explained that they should expect to see monsters that prevented you from healing or using other support skills.

“Yeah, that does sound worse than just regular attacks.”

“I’d prefer to avoid taking any fights at all, if we can. But if we do, be extra careful.”

“Okay, I will!”

They made their way down the passage and carefully scoped out the next clearing.

This was an super-dangerous area. Lava was spurting out all over at regular intervals.

The glowing red geysers were so strong, they hit the ceiling. The girls exchanged glances.

“S-Sally? What do we do?”

“I’m pretty sure you could just bulldoze through, Maple...but that can’t be the intended solution.”

They discussed a few strategies, but even if this entire area did damage to them, if Maple used Martyr’s Devotion, and Sally focused on healing, they figured they could probably force their way through.

“Otherwise, we’ll have to try a different path. Water Ball!”

Trying the lava-bird trick, Sally hit the floor with a water spell, but that didn’t stop the magma spurts.

Maple had been convinced the water trick was the right answer, so when it proved otherwise, her shoulders slumped.

“Ugh, it didn’t work...”

“What now? Brute force it?”

“Hngg, I’d rather do it the right way. We can’t always count on Martyr’s Devotion, and I’d rather not take damage in the first place.”

“Yeah. And if this goes like the second-floor boss and something steals or seals our skills along the way, we’re done for.”

“Uh, any backup plans?”

“Guess we’ll have to turn back for now and check the other paths. This route had its share of branches, so I guess we’ll just have to check ’em all.”

“Right. Ugh, but that means we’ve gotta double back through the bird room...” Maple sighed.

After all that work slipping past the flock.

They were trying to avoid getting hit, so they wanted to give a wide berth to anything with attacks that did fixed damage.

“I bet those things show up all over.”

“Arghhh, then let’s have items ready.”

Maple pulled some water-based orbs out of her inventory, holding them at the ready.

“You really did buy all kinds of stuff...”

“Heh-heh-heh! They’re pretty useful!”

And they headed back the way they’d come.

They made it across the lake clearing into a new passage and made sure none of the birds followed them.

“...I think we’re clear?”

“Yeah. Don’t need to watch our backs that hard, at least.”

“We picked a different path this time...and it wasn’t the only option, right?”

“We’ll have to check ’em all. Hmm, this path is changing things up on us, Maple. Keep an eye on the floor.”

Where the previous areas had been filled with red cracks, this floor was obsidian.

“I’m on it! Huh. Is this a downslope?”

Sally double-checked, and it did seem to be a slight decline.

Feeling like this would lead somewhere significant, they got excited—but stayed cautious. And when they reached the end of the slope, they found themselves in an open area lined with hardened black magma.

The size of the space was not much different from the other clearing, but there were only a few stray spurts of molten lava.

“The lava in this area is already turning solid. Easier to walk and easier to spot monsters.”

“I don’t see any right now, which means...”

Maple was starting to get the hang of this.

“Yup,” Sally said. “Best to assume they’re waiting to ambush us. Oh, here it comes!”

The ground had bulged upward, and a three-yard-tall rock giant rose up.

With fists and feet larger than either of them, its every step was echoing.

Clearly far stronger than the monsters they’d faced thus far.

“Full Deploy! Commence Assault!”

Maple kicked off her barrage, and the rock monster was too slow to dodge it. Every bullet struck home and...bounced right off.

“Ugh, so it *is* a golem? I hate golems...”

Scowling, Maple canceled the volley and put away her artillery.

The giant’s massive fist pounded the ground.

The thud of rock against rock rang out, and the ground split. A sudden wave of lava threatened to bury them both.

“Eep! W-wait—”

“We gotta dodge, Maple! This way!”

Sally took a quick step back and threw out an Ice Pillar.

Her gamble paid off—in this area, they didn’t instantly melt.

“Sorry about this!” Sally yelled and grabbed Maple with her webs on one hand, and the top of the pillar with webs on her other. “Up we go! Leap!”

“Huh? Wh-what do you mea—? Aughhh!”

Just before the lava melted the Ice Pillar, Sally launched herself at the giant itself, clearing the wave—hauling Maple along in her wake.

“And here...Defense Break!”

In midair, Sally released the webs attached to Maple, spun, and slashed the giant’s arm as they passed overhead.

And she was perfectly aware that momentum would carry Maple right down

onto the giant's head.

Belatedly, Maple remembered that this was one of the combo moves they'd discussed in advance.

"Nice, Sally!" She grinned. "How do you like *this*, golem?!"

She grabbed her shield with both hands and slammed it down. Devour gobbled up the giant's face, and she hit the ground, rolling away.

"Whoa...better get some distance before it attacks again."

Maple looked up and saw the giant turning toward them.

Sally had been busy slicing away at the legs, slowing it down, but now she dashed back to Maple's side.

"This thing's real slow. We could probably just run away."

Behind the giant, they could see a passage leading onward.

"Nah, let's beat this thing."

She had only a limited stock of Devours, and she'd used one on it already, so... Maple wasn't going to let it get away.

Sally nodded and got ready to time her Ice Pillar.

The giant's arm went up—and once more slammed the ground.

But this time, there was no lava wave.

"Maple, below!"

"Huh? Yikes!"

Before Sally's webs could grab her, rock spikes shot out from underfoot. Unable to dodge, Maple was sent flying.

"Argh, quit with the ground attacks! Hngg! Hydra!"

Still spinning upward, Maple hit back—with a poison dragon.

The giant punched right through the Hydra, hitting Maple as she descended—and caught a Devour counter for its trouble. The giant pulled its arm back, red sparks spraying from it. Judging by the HP bar over its head, this was no basic enemy—it would take *several* Devours to kill it.

Maple was sent flying and rolling across the ground—but took no damage.

“Not piercing, so I’m good! Let’s take this fight back! Saturating Chaos!”

A monstrous maw flew out of her armor, easily catching the lumbering giant and laying down the hurt.

“I’m more worried about that pool of poison than the giant... Hup!”

While Maple was going to town, Sally used her webs and Ice Pillars to flank the giant, slashing away.

Her Sword Dance move buffed her attacks the more times she dodged, and that effect was making her strikes hit pretty hard.

“This should do it!”

She slammed her dagger into the back of its neck—and the giant exploded in a shower of light.

Careful not to fall into the poison, Sally rejoined Maple.

“Good job, Sally.”

“Hmm, you too. Something that slow, maybe we’re better off not engaging. Not like it’s a boss or anything.”

“True. And my bullets bounced off it—if a boss does that, things could get rough.”

“It might just deflect attacks from too far away. Hydra’s way stronger, but it didn’t do much at that range, either.”

“Makes sense. Didn’t know enemies could do that—that’ll be tough to fight.”

“.....I mean, you deflect attacks at *close* range and hit back way harder, so...”

“.....Eh-heh-heh, well, it’s a good thing we’re on the same side then,” Maple said, looking sheepish.

“No arguments here,” Sally replied, clearly meaning it. “Let’s move on, Maple. Don’t want another one of those spawning on us.”

“Agreed! Oh, but gimme a sec.”

She opened up her inventory screen and changed her gear, equipping Helping

Hands.

Pale hands appeared, and she gave them White Snow and Amythest Geode, then moved them around until she was floating between the two.

“I’m getting tired of constantly staring at the ground,” she explained.

“...Riiiiight. I might be getting used to those...”

Sally took furtive glances at the pale hands from the corner of her eye. They’d dropped on the sixth-stratum horror zone, and she wasn’t the biggest fan.

“You want ’em? I got them for you, after all.”

“Nah, once I go ‘nope,’ there’s no going back...”

As they chatted, Sally led them down the next path. Maple bobbed along beside her, surrounded by shields.

As the path continued its gradual descent, the terrain kept on changing.

And when they reached the next open area, their surroundings started to get weird.

“Sally, Sally!” Maple said, gaping at the view.

Sally was just as astonished. She looked at Maple, then back at the view.

“I can’t believe it. A moment ago, it was all molten rock... Feels weird.”

Before them lay a field of virgin snow and walls of pure ice.

The volcano had given way to a winter wonderland.

They stepped into the cave of ice and snow, Maple still floating on her shield sandwich, head constantly swiveling.

“You can probably get down now.”

“You sure my feet won’t suddenly freeze?”

“Well, I haven’t had any problems.”

Though she seemed sure that there wasn’t much to worry about, Sally would probably dodge traps without even trying, so Maple ultimately decided not to risk it.

They moved on out into the open—and were exposed for mere moments when their ears caught the sound of ice cracking.

“Maple! Above!”

“Right!”

The ice on the ceiling cracked open, and an ice-covered snake fell toward them.

Big enough to swallow them both whole.

“I’ll kite it!” Sally yelled, striking the snake in the air and running off. It turned to follow her, and Maple slid along its flank.

“Coming through!” she yelled.

She held up her all-consuming shield as she slid, and Devour chewed huge chunks out of its side.

“And why not? Hydra!”

Maple’s poison splash did more than just hurt the snake. The poison visibly spread through its icy body.

“It worked! Nice!” Maple yelped, glad that poison actually worked on it.

But since she’d done a ton of damage, the snake switched to target her instead of Sally.

“Okay, okay! You aren’t getting through *my* defense!”

She was lying down between two shields and had Night’s Facsimile held out in front of her—and it still had Devour. She was tanky to begin with and currently holed up in her shell.

But the snake’s AI wasn’t dumb—it didn’t attack head-on. Just as Maple had done, it hit her flank, biting her out of reach of Night’s Facsimile.

“Ah! I can’t Devour you there...come at me from the front!”

Maple tried to get her hands around, but the shields it was biting were quickly covered in ice—and that was carving away at the shields’ durability.

“Oh nooo! Don’t do that!”

“We’ll just have to kill it,” Sally said, leaping onto its head. She started stabbing away at it, and the snake vanished in a puff of light.

“Thanks, Sally.”

“You got it most of the way there. Any time you land a good hit with your poison, it really packs a punch.”

She took in the lake of poison that had formed around them—then noticed objects submerged in it.

“Maple, I think it dropped some stuff.”

“Mm? Oh, in the poison. I’ll go take a look.”

She hovered herself over, reached down, and pulled one out.

It was a lump of ice the size of a softball. There was a blue light inside making it glitter. Definitely a key item of some kind.

“Let’s see...,” she said.

Firn

Using this can harden the lava in an area.

Effect lasts thirty seconds.

“Sally! These things are pretty good!”

“Then pick ’em up and bring ’em here.”

“Will do!”

Maple scooped up all three of the Firns and gingerly brought them back to Sally.

“I think you’ll be better at using these. You want ’em?”

“Mm? But if I’m not able to use ’em, it could be bad. You’d better keep one yourself.”

“Will do. Here!”

Sally took two Firns from Maple, checked the description, and nodded.

“If we use these, we should be able to get through that molten zone no

problem. Still..."

"What's up?"

"Just wondering if the boss is lava or ice. If this item exists, there might be more lava waiting for us..."

Sally stared thoughtfully at the glittering ice in her hand. Maple frowned.

"It seems a waste to use something this pretty. I wish it dropped more."

Maple gave the Firn a wistful look.

Once you've used a consumable, it disappears.

"Then let's keep looking. That snake wasn't that strong. I bet your guns would work on it."

And if they couldn't find any more snakes, Sally promised she'd try and get them through using only her two.

"You're sure?"

"No prob. Just keep me safe!"

"You got it! As long as it isn't a monster, I can handle...a bit of pain."

"Remember to use Pierce Guard. And we for sure don't wanna get hit by those molten rocks."

A few more snakes and they'd have nothing to worry about. They tried hunting but found only two-yard-tall humanoid ice sculptures and bats with ice breath.

Either the spawn rate was low or there had only ever been one. Either way, they failed to find another snake.

After far too much time spent looking, Sally suggested, "We wrap up for today, yeah? You've used most of your skills, and we *did* clear the second floor today."

"Well, we found something good, so why not?"

These items would definitely help them progress, and they'd mapped the whole ice zone while searching for the snake.

And if the boss room wasn't in the ice zone, then odds were high it would throw molten rocks at them. It was a long hike from the back of the icescape to the volcanic area—enough that they might be better off logging out and restarting from the third-floor entrance.

“Okay, then next time, let's plow through that lava zone. See you later!”

“Yeah. Bye!”

They took one last look at the tower above and logged out.

Both girls knew this boss could potentially be a real pain, and they wanted to be ready for it.

Back in the real world, Kaede put away her console and stretched out on her bed.

“Whew...I've gotta float through that molten room. But what about the boss fight?”

She figured Atrocity wouldn't be of much use, so what skills could she use instead?

“Maybe Risa can figure something out. If we can come up with a good plan, that would help a lot...”

Still pondering strategy, she headed downstairs.



Defense Build and Tower Conquest

The next day, Maple and Sally were back on the third floor, all skills refilled and ready for anything.

“Okay, today we beat the boss!”

“Mm-hmm. These third-floor foes are not much fun—and I bet the boss is right through this room.”

They’d decided not to look for more Firn. Instead, they headed right for the room with all the molten lava jets. It was still spraying magma everywhere.

“Okay, I’m gonna use one. Clearly that’s what they’re for.”

Sally used a Firn, and a blizzard sprang up. All the molten rock turned black, solidifying—and was coated in ice.

In the blink of an eye, the molten ground turned to a frozen wasteland.

“Uh...well, that froze more than I expected, but let’s get a move on, Maple! If it starts thawing, we’ll have to use another.”

“O-oh! Right.”

Maple was already pinned between her floating shields, so she had them hover away.

But even on her floating shields, Maple couldn’t go much faster than she did on foot. Halfway across the room, lava started breaching the ice.

“Maple, it’s time! Get down!”

“Ack! Right, I’m coming.”

Maple slipped out from between her shields. Sally webbed her up and started dragging her across the molten zone. They weren’t sure if she could actually block everything in her shield sandwich, and the lava might just break the shields, so they were opting for the standard strategy of running for it.

But as they ran, the lava geysers came back to life, shooting so high, they hit the ceiling.

“Urp...M-Martyr’s Devotion!”

She wasn’t sure if this was a great idea, but she did it anyway, hoping it would keep Sally safe.

Ready to soak some damage, she closed her eyes—but instead of pain, she felt herself floating.

“This should get us through before the lava hits!”

“.....? O-oh!”

This was the skill attached to the boots Maple had found on the sixth floor and given Sally—One Step in the Grave.

It allowed her to create several footholds in midair. She kept climbing higher, bounding safely over the rising threats.

“And you kept me from taking any fall damage. Nice.”

“Thanks, Sally. Whew...we didn’t catch fire!”

Maple looked back at the glowing lava, seeming relieved. She’d activated angel form to protect Sally but definitely preferred to avoid anything that hurt. Certain that they were in a safe area, she turned off the skill.

They headed onward and faced no further obstacles before reaching the doors to the boss room.

“It really *was* just past that room.”

“I knew it!”

“Well, it was clearly the toughest obstacle around. Shall we?”

“Yeah, I’m all set!”

Maple was getting revved up, so Sally pushed open the door.

Inside, the entire floor was lava. The only footholds were stepping-stones—movement on the ground would be very limited.

“Ughhh... Welp, I’m flying.”

Maple immediately resorted to her shield-sandwich tactic.

With limited options for dodging, this was a tough room for Sally's build.

"I don't like it, but the boss ain't waiting."

As they watched, the lava at the center started bubbling. A spray crested, and a figure loomed.

It was a giant—made entirely of glowing lava.

"Sally, Sally! That thing looks crazy strong!"

"If it throws out a move so big you can't avoid it, use the Firn!"

"You got it! I'll be watching from up there."

Maple and her shields rose into the air and flew away.

Since molten foes were highly likely to do fixed damage to Maple, it wasn't really safe to use Martyr's Devotion.

"Ice Pillar! Yeah, thought not."

She ruled out that option first with a quick test, then started nimbly hopping across the stepping-stones, closing in.

"Ancient Ocean!"

Once she was in range, she used a skill she'd earned in the second event. Fish appeared around her, glowing with a blue light and swimming through the air.

"Water Ball!"

Like with the lava birds, Sally was going for water-based attacks.

The giant wasn't quick to begin with, and the fish were stacking an AGI debuff on it. It was easy to land a spell, and each time she did, the surface turned black.

"Okay. But each time it moves, the stepping-stones— Yikes!"

The giant surged forward, and the lava dripping off it melted the stepping-stones.

After a while, new ones took their place, but it was definitely something to watch out for.

Meanwhile, the giant was raising one molten arm, taking a swing at Sally.

“.....!”

She used One Step in the Grave to dance up into the air, narrowly avoiding it.

But when its arm hit the ground, waves of fire shot out, nipping at her heels.

“Good thing I was watching!”

Just before the fire hit Sally, Maple came down between them.

She left the two floating shields where they were, angling her black shield down and blocking the spurting flames.

“Sally, evac! Evac!”

“Y-yeah! Thanks!”

Sally jumped on top of Maple’s shield, and she lifted them straight up like an elevator.

“Wow, it’s going crazy down there.”

The giant was surging around the ring, slamming its arms down, causing pillars of fire to erupt in every direction.

“Looks like the pillars don’t reach this high, but we still need a plan.”

“This isn’t the steadiest platform. Lemme summon Syrup.”

Maple called out her pet turtle, then used Giganticize on it. They carefully picked their way from the shields onto its back.

“As long as the enemy isn’t good at hitting us in the air, we can take our time studying its attack patterns and figure out a strategy. Not...something anyone else can do...”

“Please relax and enjoy the ride!”

“Don’t mind if I do.”

They relaxed above the burning boss room, hashing out their approach.

After a long talk, Maple made full use of their airborne advantage to drop Acid Rain and Machine God’s artillery fire down on the boss.

The results were discouraging. It was equally immune to poison and bullets. Syrup's Spirit Cannon worked but had a lengthy cooldown. Sally's water spells would have to be their main damage source. For safety's sake, Maple switched to her white armor, boosting her max HP enough that she had access to her damage-negation angel skill, Aegis.

She drank a potion, topping up her new HP pool, and waited for Sally to give the word.

"Ready when you are! Heh-heh, haven't used anything but Martyr's Devotion in ages."

"Okay, Maple. Float those shields, would ya? Yeah, just like that. Now..."

Maple adjusted the heights, making two shields float. Sally got on the lower one, attaching her feet to it with her webs.

"And down you go. How's that? Can you reach yet?"

Maple slid the shield down until Sally was *just* in range to hit the giant with her magic.

"If we keep adjusting to match its movements, this should work. Anything goes wrong, I'll evac."

The second shield was floating between Sally and Syrup at the midpoint.

Maple could move her shields only a set distance from her, but she kept them at that range, wheeling around the sky as the giant continued its rampage on the ground.

"Hngg, this *is* hard. Sally! How's it going?"

"I dunno if I'm solidifying much of anything, but I'm aiming for max effect! It's definitely doing damage at least."

"Righty-oh! Keep it up, Syrup!"

Cannon barrels sprouted from her arm and back, and she aimed them down.

Sally wasn't exactly a pure magic build, and all on her own, it had taken a while—but the blackened surface was gradually growing, and after a few more spells hit, all remaining molten bits formed one solid mass.

There could be no clearer sign that this was their chance to rack up some damage. Maple wasn't about to pass that up.

“Commence Assault! Syrup, Spirit Cannon!”

They both unleashed a hail of lasers, hitting the cooled surface of the giant and whittling away its HP.

“All right! My guns work now!” Maple yelled—just as the giant started glowing red once again. “Awww, it's already over. Sally, the rest is up to you —?”

But before Sally could get to work, the flaming giant slowly wheeled toward Maple, raising an arm, flames roiling.

“Maple, defend!”

“O-oh, right! Aegis!”

A burst of light enveloped her, Syrup, and Sally.

A wave of red molten lava washed over them—and Maple's glow negated *all* that damage.



As the light faded and their vision cleared, they located the giant again.

“Ha?! Sally, what the—?”

Where the giant had stood, Maple now saw a glittering bluish lump hovering just above the ground.

“It’s not fire anymore? It’s *ice*?!”

As if answering Sally’s questions, ice began spreading across the room, radiating out from the blue lump.

It coated the lava floor, climbed the walls, and began making giant icicles on the ceiling.

And from the lump itself, ice rose up like a sprouting tree, forming—an ice giant.

“A new form? But the same HP. And...”

Sally looked at Maple, grinning.

“I can fight ice, right, Sally?”

“It went and debuffed itself!”

“Mwa-ha-ha! Commence Assault!”

Maple started firing. Unlike the lava version, this time she did damage from the get-go.

But the new form was not *entirely* to their advantage.

“Okay, next we just— Erp!”

Maple had been focused on the target below, but she saw a shadow at her feet and jerked her head up.

And found an icicle falling toward her.

“Eep... Owwww! Urgh...”

With a tremendous noise, the icicle shattered Maple’s weapons. She’d *tried* to dodge, but it landed right on her back, and red damage sparks sprayed. The lava form’s main tactic was dealing damage from below, but this ice version rained death from above.

“Piercing damage? Maple, put Syrup away! More are falling!”

Sally quickly made a pillar of her own ice, sliding down it.

Maple returned Syrup to her ring and then just fell straight down.

“Quick Change... Okay!”

“Right, hit it hard!”

“Yep, all-out attack!”

With Maple back in her black gear, she got ready to rumble—one eye on the threat from above.

Sally could utilize her Ice Pillars again, and she was making good use of them.

But just as they were about to attack, a wave of glittering white chill rippled across the floor—a torrent of ice.

“Look out, Maple!”

“Saturating Chaos! Commence Assault!”

Her monster hit the ice wave, smashing a hole in it—but part of it still struck Maple and knocked her down.

But it didn’t do damage.

“Normal attacks ain’t no thang!”

Sally ran up her Ice Pillar, jumped onto the giant’s shoulder, and started slashing at its neck and head.

Trying to protect that area, the giant fired ice spikes at her, and more icicles fell, but Sally nimbly slipped through the barrage, her Sword Dance aura aglow.

“Yep, way easier if it isn’t on fire.”

“Um...?”

Maple was on the move, attacking and avoiding icicles but ignoring ice waves and the giant’s fists. Then she noticed her body was covered in a layer of frost.

She tried brushing it off, to no avail.

“Sally, look out! Something’s...trying to freeze me? I think?”

Maple didn't sound that worried. She called a warning to Sally, but the frost wasn't slowing her down, so she kept attacking.

"...So many things just don't work on you. But I'd better be careful!"

As the giant's HP dropped, its attacks grew more intense and more powerful—but this was not a foe built for speed, and Sally was dodging everything with such ease that she had plenty of time to think.

Once they hit a certain damage threshold, an extra-cold wave radiated out—and the red glow of molten lava appeared at the giant's core.

"Maple, let's finish this before it switches back!"

Sally dropped one last furious combo, then dashed up out of harm's way.

"Got it! Hydra! Saturating Chaos! Atrocity!"

The parade of fearsome blows made the giant stagger, and then Monster Maple charged in.

Dispersing the chill with her fiery breath, she used her talons and teeth to tear into the massive icy body.

"That should do it!"

A slew of ice spikes shot up from the floor, but Maple breathed fire once more—and sealed the deal.

Cracks spread across the giant—and it crumbled, the shards of ice shattering into grains of light that melted into the air.

"We won! Hnggg, and I thought we'd be safe in the air."

Still in monster form, Maple hung her head in slight disappointment that things hadn't gone according to plan.

"Good work. Mm? A new skill?"

"Oh, I got one, too! Lessee..."

They had not expected *this* message, and they quickly opened their menus, checking out the new skill.

"I really don't know why that works in that body...", Sally said, watching

Monster Maple flip through her screens.

But the new skill soon had all her attention.

Cataclysmic Eruption

MP: 50. Locks movement for three seconds before activation. Three-minute cooldown. Creates a field on the ground that launches lava directly upward for one minute, dealing damage that ignores all defense.

“Nice. Good move for you, Maple. What do you think? Gonna put that on a slot?”

Skills on slots could be used a few times at no MP cost, even if your MP wasn’t high enough to use them otherwise.

“Thinking about it.”

“...Wanna check out the fourth floor first?”

“Yeah, let’s do that.”

Cataclysmic Eruption wasn’t necessarily something she *had* to have. Better to see what lay ahead before making any decisions.

342 Name: Anonymous Greatsworder

How far y’all get?

343 Name: Anonymous Great Shielder

I’m taking my time, so only just cleared the second floor.

We ain’t got Maple with us.

344 Name: Anonymous Mage

We just cleared the fourth boss.

345 Name: Anonymous Spear Master

Mid-fourth floor.

Wait, no Maple? Whaaat?

Well, even without her, you can probably do just fine.

346 Name: Anonymous Greatsworder

She's like your ultimate weapon.

You can activate her anytime.

And no boss can stand against her.

347 Name: Anonymous Great Shielder

Maple and Sally are tackling the highest difficulty together.

With no issues apparently.

348 Name: Anonymous Archer

These ain't foes you can handle in pairs.

Normally.

349 Name: Anonymous Spear Master

They're both off the charts.

I've seen Sally run across air. Once you own the skies...

350 Name: Anonymous Greatsworder

That wouldn't keep you safe on the third floor.

Those geysers went all the way up.

351 Name: Anonymous Great Shielder

I saw a FAQ, but what's it like for real?

352 Name: Anonymous Spear Master

First half all fixed damage.

Back half dropping piercing icicles.

Big hit boxes but clear telegraphing so you can dodge if you wanna.

And the boss's second phase debuffs you every time it hits.

353 Name: Anonymous Archer

Yeah, on the third floor your best bet is avoiding instead of soaking.

There are lava and ice items you can find that make it easy.

354 Name: Anonymous Mage

About those items...

I hear you'll get skills if you don't use 'em.

But since we *did* use them, we mopped the floor with the boss.

355 Name: Anonymous Spear Master

Wonder if we missed anything like that on other floors...

Not much intel out there yet, so I'm just guessing.

356 Name: Anonymous Great Shielder

Like, not using bombs on the first floor?

Maybe we shoulda tried to hammer through it.

The twins' regular attacks smashed its barriers.

357 Name: Anonymous Greatsworder

Even without any skills?!

358 Name: Anonymous Great Shielder

Maple's star pupils.

359 Name: Anonymous Mage I'd sign up for that class.

360 Name: Anonymous Spear Master

I bet Maple used the bombs.

Dunno what key items that second floor had, so maybe just the third.

If Maple got the third-floor skills, she'll be flinging ice and fire around now.

361 Name: Anonymous Greatsworder

She already breathes fire!

362 Name: Anonymous Archer

This skill is technically lava.

If you can breathe fire, why not lava, too?

363 Name: Anonymous Mage

Madness.

Players aren't meant to breathe ice or lava!

At least *throw* them.

364 Name: Anonymous Greatsworder

Even I'm alarmed that "breathing" was my go-to verb here.

365 Name: Anonymous Great Shielder

I wouldn't put it past Maple to manage it in monster form.

366 Name: Anonymous Mage

Don't encourage her! She's inhuman enough!

367 Name: Anonymous Great Shielder I bet they clear the tower easily.

Meanwhile, I'm actually being a proper tank. Been a while.

368 Name: Anonymous Spear Master

Maple Tree is plenty strong even without her around.

Her absence just brings y'all down from secret boss to last boss.

369 Name: Anonymous Mage

But I bet Maple will have more trouble with the fourth floor.

The dungeon is one thing, but that boss...

370 Name: Anonymous Spear Master

Agreed.

371 Name: Anonymous Great Shielder

Seriously? That rough? I'll have to scope that.

372 Name: Anonymous Mage

I think it'll at least inflict some SAN damage.

373 Name: Anonymous Greatsworder

I see...

374 Name: Anonymous Mage

Naturally, if I beat a boss, ain't no way it takes out Maple.

But the thing is—it also flies.

Even as the forum buzzed, Maple and Sally were about to reach the fourth floor.



Defense Build and Tower's Fourth Floor

They closed their skill menus and headed for the stairs.

"Staying in Atrocity form, Maple?"

"Seems like a waste to cancel."

Sally was in the lead, with Monster Maple lumbering along behind her.

They started climbing the stairs to the next floor, chatting.

"I guess you can get skills in the tower, too."

"Yeah, that...Cataclysmic Eruption thing? The MP and start-up lock are bad for me."

Sally hadn't really raised her MP that much, and she couldn't use skills that relied on it very often. And as an evasion tank, the last thing she wanted was something that forced her to stay still.

"But you don't even *need* to move, Maple. Make smart use of the damage field and you'll be able to handle bosses with high defense."

"Mm! But I'll have to be careful not to step on it myself."

"Ha-ha! Especially when you're blasting yourself around."

As soon as she finished saying that, a thought struck Sally, and she turned to face Maple.

"Maybe it's best if you don't slot it until we've cleared the tower, though."

"Yeah?"

"We'll earn medals at the end, and you might wanna look at all the choices first."

Completing the tower would give them ten silver medals. Like the second event, they could exchange those for skills. And those might be even stronger.

Putting a skill on an equipment slot was irreversible, so better safe than sorry.

“Besides, you’re pretty much set for offense already.”

“Attack *and* defense!”

“All the more reason to leave it for now. Look, we can see light at the top of the stairs!”

They stared up, eyes adjusting to the light. They heard water falling and saw a forest beyond.

The fourth-floor entrance opened at the back of a waterfall, a wide river stretching out before them.

Peering around the edges of the fall, they saw the sky above and an ocean in the distance—even though this was *inside* a tower.

“Wow, it’s huge!”

“Yeah...guess we’d better get down?”

There were some stepping-stones leading from this cave to the river below.

Definitely meant for humans. In her current form, Maple couldn’t really use them.

“You could probably just jump down.”

“Yeah, I can handle that height, no prob.”

While Sally hopped down the stones, Maple just burst through the waterfall itself, landing in the basin with a tremendous splash.

Not long after, the monster’s head surfaced, looking none the worse for wear.

“It’s pretty deep! We might have to swim from here.”

“Hmm. No obvious way to enter that forest. Looks like we’re *supposed* to head downstream. Wanna ride Syrup?”

“I’d have to turn off Atrocity first. Whaddaya think?”

“Good point. In that case, never mind. We’ll just make the best of it.”

Sally figured the extra offense would be more valuable.

And the third floor had gone out of its way to provide anti-air icicles, so she didn’t think the fourth floor would just let them fly over it, either.

“Okay! Um, Sally, wanna ride on me? I think there’s monsters in the water.”

“Yeah?”

“They keep biting me!”

Maple lifted one of her six limbs out of the water, and there were several fish attached to it, tails flapping.

“That might be the way to go, then. It *is* hard to watch your blind spots underwater.”

“Ha-ha-ha. Then let’s head downstream!”

With Sally on her back, Maple started thrashing all six limbs, moving faster than the current.

They coasted along the river for a while without any attacks from the forested banks.

Martyr’s Devotion was keeping them safe, so Sally didn’t need to watch out for much—mostly just piercing attacks from the land. That made it almost relaxing.

“How’s it going underwater, Maple?”

“There’s fish and stuff? I’m accidentally shredding them sometimes.”

Poor monsters had no luck. Each time Maple’s XP went up, she put two of her limbs together by way of apology.

“Well, swimming sounds dangerous. Maybe I’ll try fishing? They might drop rare materials.”

“Oooo, fishing... If only I was any good at it.”

Maple’s stats were extremely...unbalanced, and this locked her out of a lot of skills. She could fish for an hour and catch maybe three.

“Well, you’ve got the swimming part covered. We’ve all got our strengths... Hokay.”

Sally dropped a line in the water and kicked back. Not long after, she hauled in a fish she’d never seen, but after checking the description, she decided it didn’t seem to have any unusual properties. It was just tasty.

“Wonder if everyone else swims through this floor?”

“Good question. I mean, there’s a *lot* of monsters in this water. I bet not many people take the Maple route here. They sell boats and stuff back in town.”

“Boats, huh? That seems nice. We should go sailing together later.”

“Sure. Oh, another bite... Hngg?”

“What’s wrong, Sally?”

“Is it me or...? It isn’t. The current’s getting faster!”

And as it picked up, they started seeing large boulders in the river. A boat would likely have smashed against those.

“Sally, hold on tight! I can probably survive bumping those...”

“Avoid ’em if you can, but... Argh, too late!”

Sally used webs to tie herself to Maple, keeping herself in range of Martyr’s Devotion. The current was now so strong that Maple didn’t even need to swim.

“Cool! I soaked it. See, Sally?”

The monster’s size was a factor here. She wasn’t having much luck dodging the oncoming boulders, but even if she smashed into one, Maple took no damage. She was very much at the mercy of the current, but that didn’t stop her from happily crowing.

“Urp... As thrill rides go, it’s certainly... Maple! Eyes front!”

“Huh? Uh-oh! Aughhh!”

Maple pinballed through a bunch of boulders in a row, losing her balance and going under.

Sally cut the webs and snagged one of the boulders, saving herself.

“That was close... Maple? Where are you?”

Sally started using midair footholds and webs to move boulder to boulder, looking for Maple.

But that hideous black creature was nowhere to be found.

Sally pressed on across the air...and water arrows shot out of the river in

response.

“Don’t you dare!”

Her body twisted out of the arrows’ path, and she let herself fall to the boulder below.

“Okay, no more arrows, but the river itself is full of monsters, so I can’t exactly dive in... Hmm?”

Her eyes were darting every which way, and she’d caught a glimpse of something black. It hit a rock and was thrown upward.

Sally took one more dash across the sky, dodging water arrows and dropping her webs into the water.

“Gotcha... C’mon out!”

Feeling a tug on her line, she attached herself to the boulder below and put her back into it, pulling hard.

Maple breached the river’s surface in human form.

“Hokay...! You still with us, Maple?”

“Ugh...I swallowed so much water... Thanks, Sally.”

“And the drowning killed your Atrocity form? Well, glad I caught you in time.”

“My eyes are spinning... I didn’t know which way was up...”

Maple collapsed in a heap on the boulder.

“We should catch our breath. You had a rough go of it, and we’ve gotta figure out a plan to get down this river.”

Riding Maple was no longer an option, but the aerial route would leave them full of arrows.

“Y-yeah...rest here... Wish we could just turn the current off...”

“It’s not exactly a faucet—but it would make things easier.”

They rested on the rock until Maple got her wits together.

They killed some time fishing together. It seemed the actual monsters weren’t biting, so they caught no dangerous fish, and Sally steadily gathered a pile of

materials to give Iz later.

Meanwhile, Maple was still not catching much of anything.

“Hmm, I’m just not good at this.”

“Your stats haven’t changed at all. How’re you feeling? I feel like a Syrup ride’s our only option here.”

“Yeah, we don’t exactly have a boat.”

It was Maple’s monster form that had allowed them to bulldoze through the river mobs so far, and they’d never owned a boat in the first place.

If they wanted to attempt the orthodox approach, they’d have to leave the tower entirely.

“Urgh, are those water arrows gonna do piercing damage?”

“Very likely. I mean...they’re *arrows*.”

Sally experimented and found that if she hit them hard enough, the arrows would turn to mist. And they were definitely piercing. But since she *could* destroy them, brute-forcing their way past was an option.

“I don’t *want* to use Martyr’s Devotion again, but if I don’t, I can’t keep Syrup safe...”

“We could ride the shields? If we don’t defend right, we’ll take a lot of hits, but...”

“Let’s do that! And try *not* to get hit. At all.”

“Yeah, I’m still gunning for no damage. Good use of footholds oughtta make it doable, barely. Maple, you’ll need to be on the offensive, too.”

“You got it! Bullets versus arrows!”

Maple changed up her gear, deployed her weapons, and had the Helping Hands float a shield in the air.

“Gotta use Night’s Facsimile for this. Don’t want to risk the others breaking.”

Maple’s unique series shield was highly durable, and even if it did break, it had Destructive Growth and would restore itself. She had it float horizontally,

and they both stepped on board.

“Then the second shield right behind Sally...”

And Maple got down on her knees, holding the third shield up in front of her.

She extended her artillery around the sides of the bottom shield, all barrels pointed down.

“Ho-ho, you brought out the big guns.”

“If I can shoot ‘em all down, we don’t need to worry!”

“If anything gets through, I’ll handle ‘em.”

“Cool! Up, up, and away we go!”

Maple eased the shields away from the boulder.

As she did, the river churned, and water arrows shot at them. Maple immediately began firing back.

“Got ‘em! Onward!”

“We’ve got the advantage on suppressing fire.”

Shooting arrows and the river monsters, they moved steadily forward.

Without Sally needing to lift a finger.

“This many arrows I can handle!”

“Might not have been so easy on Syrup. Just— Whoops! They’re picking up a bit!”

Sally struck down an errant arrow.

“They might be! There’s certainly lots of splashing against this shield.”

“Yeah...uh, Maple! Look out ahead!”

“Okay! Lemme take those out!”

Her guns turned to a school of fish, each fish a solid twenty inches long. They were jumping into the air and falling back into the river below.

“Some kinda flying fish?”

“Except in a river. They’re...probably enemies?”

They were nimbly dodging Maple's barrage and getting closer.

"I could shoot more if I wasn't busy with these arrows..."

But even as Maple spoke, monsters were leaping up at them from directly below, fins gleaming like blades.

Most bounced harmlessly off the shield and fell back into the river, but a few got through, damaging her guns and cannons.

"Aughhhh! My artillery!"

"Maple, arrows!"

The broken weapons reduced the amount of suppressing fire enough that several water arrows got through.

Figuring this was up to her, Sally snagged Maple with her webs, used One Step in the Grave to make footholds in the air, and ran up an invisible staircase.

Countless arrows followed after them, more and more by the second.

"Maple! Redeploy! And—"

"I know! Hydra!"

Maple's poison dragon swallowed up all the incoming arrows, leaving the shield and the water below purple with poison.

"Okay! Commence Assault!"

Seeing Maple opening fire once more, Sally quit making new steps and dropped them back toward the shield.

Maple saw more arrows coming and returned fire, landing on her back with Sally on top of her.

"The shield's soaked in poison, too..."

"Maybe time for another boulder rest. All this poison is nerve-racking."

And the cost of making those air steps was lowered stats—Sally wanted to get those back to normal.

"This river is rough."

"But we're pretty far in. I mean, look how far the waterfall is."

“Oh! Then the goal can’t be much farther?”

“Let’s hope. Although that means a boss fight...”

“Urp. Our work is never done.”

Maple slid her shield over to a boulder nearby.

Taking regular rests like that and weathering several more arrow storms, they made it down the river without taking damage. As the current slowed, so did the projectiles.

“Sally, I’m not seeing any more arrows.”

“Whew...finally, a respite. The water itself is still teeming with monsters, so we can’t exactly get off the shield...”

“Good point. Oh, you can see their shadows!”

Fish were swimming just below the surface.

But many of those were likely monsters.

Maple kept her shield moving downstream.

“I’m glad we got through. But I gotta wonder if the conventional approach would have been easier.”

“Heh-heh. Wanna go back and try?”

“Nope! That’s a big ol’ nope from me!”

Maple shook her head vigorously.

She did *not* enjoy getting hurt and would much prefer to avoid any areas with pointy attacks.

Especially since they were trying to clear the tower without taking damage.

“Well, the next boss might use piercing attacks, but we’ll cross that bridge when we come to it.”

“Right, the boss... Ugh, let’s hope it doesn’t.”

“We’re almost at the ocean we saw from the waterfall.”

“I haven’t been to the beach in a while! The last few floors didn’t have any.”

“True. What kind of bosses do you find in water? We’d better plan ahead now.”

The monsters in the river couldn’t hurt Maple, so Sally was able to keep her mind focused on other things as they hovered along.

The river itself never forked. Before long, the forests on the banks petered out, and the view before them opened up.

Nothing but ocean as far as the eye could see, sunlight glittering on the gently lapping waves.

“Sally, think we’ll find the boss here?”

“I dunno. There’s not exactly anywhere to stand. Uh...I really don’t wanna fight *here*.”

Maple agreed.

But the less they liked a thing, the more this tower was inclined to throw it at them. Even as they watched, the ocean’s surface heaved, and a boss monster crested the waves.

It was a sea turtle some five yards long.

“Oh! A turtle!”

“So...we *are* fighting here.”

“Which is bigger, this boss or Syrup?”

Maple’s tone was less “boss fight imminent” and more “excited child.” Her eyes locked on the sea turtle.

“...Don’t get too attached.”

“I—I won’t!”

As they spoke, the turtle started moving.

It dove below the surface once; then a path made of water shot toward the sky, letting the turtle swim freely through the air.

It went back and forth between the water and the sky, making streaming water paths as it went.

For a minute, they gaped at this spectacle. A network of water roads arced across the air—truly a sight for the ages.

“Wow! Just...wow!”

“It ain’t attacking. This must be laying the groundwork. And it sure is pretty...”

“Sally! Sally! Can we get on its back?”

“Uh...technically, maybe? No, wait—it’s a boss, Maple!”

“Just for a minute! I wanna try. It’s gonna be so much fun! A whole different thing from riding Syrup!” Her eyes gleamed. She kept moving closer.

Sally took another glance at the sea turtle, then figured...why not?

“Okay, just for a minute.”

“Yes! Martyr’s Devotion!”

Once she was ready to keep Sally safe, she had another idea and got something out of her inventory.

“A snorkel?”

“This’ll let me breathe a little underwater. I forgot I even had one!”

“You sure do buy a bit of everything. I’ll use my webs to tie us to its back.”

“Thanks! Let’s make this happen!”

And thus, the fourth-floor boss battle began.

“So how do we get on? It’s flying around like crazy and throwing, like, water orbs at us...”

The moment it entered its combat phase, the turtle started leaping among the different water paths.

Blue magic circles gleamed around it, and these were spitting projectiles their way. They were flying slowly toward it on a shield, and the orbs kept hitting them.

“They don’t do damage, at least... Hngg, let’s try coming in from above!”

Maple summoned Syrup, made it giant, had it float next to them, and then moved the shield so they could drop down on its shell.

Sally followed her aboard and stretched, feeling much more secure with all this extra legroom.

“Ready to go.”

“On your mark.”

Maple had Syrup fly higher, into the sea turtle’s domain, flitting among the water paths.

“That water’s really gushing along, huh?”

“I bet we can swim in it. How else would we reach the boss?”

“Hmm...is that why it’s flying all around like this?”

“Prolly. But first, we’re climbing on board! Should I web it when we get close?”

“Yeah! Preferably when it’s right below us.”

Relaxing and chatting, they waited for the boss to get in position. It was actively attacking them, so ordinarily there should’ve been no opportunity to kick back like this, but with Maple around, unless an attack did piercing damage, it might as well not exist.

“Okay, now!”

Sally stuck her webs to the sea turtle’s back, put an arm around Maple, and leaped from shell to shell.

Her webs contracted, and they landed on the boss’s back with only a minor impact.

“Success!”

“It’s not doing damage and doesn’t have that many attack types, so getting aboard was easy enough.”

Sally used her webs to make sure they were both firmly attached to the boss’s shell, and since Syrup was now outside the range of Martyr’s Devotion, Maple put it back in her ring.

Now they could ride the boss as much as they liked.

“I always just make Syrup float. It can’t *actually* fly. It’s fun to swoop around like this!”

“Nobody else can fly like you do, remember? Your thing is basically breaking game mechanics.”

“I wish these wings let me fly.”

Maple pointed to the angel wings Martyr’s Devotion gave her. They were mostly a visual effect.

“Also...this isn’t as smooth a ride as I expected.”

“Urgh... It’s like getting caught in a rainstorm.”

They were still getting regularly splashed with water orbs. These did no damage, of course, but the experience still wasn’t exactly pleasant.

Maple was wearing the snorkel she’d prepared, but since the turtle wasn’t diving underwater, it had done her little good.

“Hmm, do I have anything for this? Oh! Maybe this’ll do the trick.”

She pulled out a beach umbrella and a pair of beach chairs.

“You really do have *everything* in there. Is this why you never have any money?”

“If I just put them down, they’ll go flying. Can you stick ’em in place?”

“Sure.”

Now they had a little base set up on the boss’s back.

The umbrella was large enough to block all the orbs, so they were finally safe from the spray.

They sat back in their chairs. In the distance, the horizon shimmered.

“The water’s so pretty.”

“I wonder if the sun’ll set. I’d like to see that.”

“Sounds nice. We’ll have to hit a beach on one of the lower stratum instead.”

They rested for a while, letting the fatigue of their river voyage wash away. But all breaks must come to an end, and theirs came when the umbrella

snapped in half.

It had been soaking attacks. Maple might not take damage from them, but items certainly did.

“Maple, watch out. It’s heading straight for the water!”

“Ha? W-we haven’t even done anything yet!”

But the sea turtle kept plunging, diving deep. Sally had a skill for this, but even with her snorkel, Maple wouldn’t last long.

Sally was considering cutting them loose and surfacing, but the boss started heading up again.

And before they ran out of breath, it was back into the arcing water paths above.

“Whew... Wh-what was that for?”

“Maybe it has to submerge after a set period of flight?”

But as they pondered, a wave kicked up from the paths around the boss, ignoring gravity, and tried to wash them away.

The webs kept them safely in place, but it was hardly enjoyable.

“Guess it wants us off...”

“Hngg. Well, while we’re still here...”

Maple rooted around her inventory one more time and pulled out a surfboard.

“Er...you know how?”

“Well, it’s making waves for us!”

Then she thanked the boss, giving its shell one last pat.

“I’ll put a lifeline on you.”

Sally set the webs to a length that would keep her in range of Martyr’s Devotion.

“Thanks!”

“Uh, Maple...we still have to actually fight this boss, remember? Don't have *too* much fun.”

“I—I remember!”

“Then go on. I'm gonna rest a bit longer.”

Sally lay down on the shell and gave it a few pets herself.

“You're so nice and cool...,” she said.

Behind her, she heard a yelp as a wave caught Maple and dragged her under.

A while after that, the boss changed up its pattern again, soaring through the air.

This change was based not on time passed but on HP lost. The girls had finally decided to actually fight it.

“Oh, the head takes more damage than the shell.”

“Saturating Chaos...”

While Sally was busily slicing away, Maple was lying back on the shell, webbed in place, wearily throwing out attacks.

Sally could hear constant gunfire and the sound of poison splashing off the turtle's feet (its weak points).

“I told you not to have too much fun!”

“Urgh...sorry...I couldn't help myself...”

Making the most of this unique opportunity to play, Maple had gone all out—and by the time Sally reeled her in, she was dog tired.

She'd looked thoroughly pleased with herself—right until she remembered they still had a boss to fight.

“I ain't waiting for you to get back up!”

“I know. But the shell is nice and cool. Very soothing...”

“...Really doesn't sound like we're in a boss fight.”

“Eh-heh-heh. Well, I know all about riding turtleback!”

“So far, no piercing attacks, so as long as our foothold’s secure and we don’t drown...”

“Hydra!”

Maple’s powerful attack took another huge chunk out of the boss’s HP and made red sparks fly everywhere.

The boss’s wave attacks were no match for Sally’s webs, and as long as Maple was sitting down, none of its other attacks did anything.

“Hey, Maple! Sea’s churning.”

“Oh man, you’re right! I bet that would have made things *real* rough if we weren’t on its back.”

They were keeping one eye on the view below and soaking regular water orbs but paying them no real heed.

“Sally, the boss just fired some sort of beam!”

“Syrup’s got one, too. Is that, like, standard turtle issue in this game?”

“Everyone’s gotta have at least *one* beam. Mm? Uh-oh, Sally! My guns stopped working!”

They’d been making steady progress, but the sea turtle’s shell and skin suddenly got harder, and their attacks no longer worked.

Figuring this was another phase shift, they started looking for a place to hit.

“The sea’s even wilder. I bet that would sink most boats.”

“Yikes. I—I definitely can’t fight in that. We were right to tie ourselves up here!”

The waves below were like spears of water. They looked like they could easily run you through.

“I’m sure that’s how you’re supposed to fight it, but...yikes.”

“What next, Sally?”

“If the top’s no good, try underneath.”

She waited for a gap in the orb onslaught and released the webs binding her

and Maple. They both jumped off, and Sally soon had them stuck to the belly.

“And we’re locked in!”

“We’re like suckerfish!”

“True!”

Like Sally had predicted, the underbelly was still soft. They started attacking, keeping one eye on the stormy skies and sea as the turtle flew around.

“I’ve never seen the view from Syrup’s belly!”

“Maybe we should have tried this while the ocean was still pretty.”

As Maple’s guns boomed, pillars of water sprang up around the turtle, shooting high into the air above.

Neither girl’s onslaught faltered. Clinging to the turtle’s belly, they were dragged high into the air, offering a bird’s-eye view of the ocean below.

And then the ocean went still, turning a beautiful blue.

“Whoa! Uh, Sally, why is the ocean suddenly so calm?”

But even as the words left her mouth, the turtle shattered, turning to light.

Which meant there was nothing keeping them up there.

“Sally! Grab on!”

“Yup! This is all you!”

It took a moment for inertia to wear off—but then they plummeted headfirst toward the waters below.

Maple pulled Sally into her arms, keeping her within range of Martyr’s Devotion. Like she always did when jumping off Syrup, she righted herself—and hit the water.

There was a huge splash, and by the time that died down, they were clinging to a floating shield, rocked by the waves.

“Whew...is it over?”

“I think so. It was a good match for me, which made things easy. And the entrance to the next area opened. We’ve got loads of skills left, so let’s keep

going!!”

“What about breaks?”

“You just had one.”

“Eh-heh-heh, I guess I did!”

The boss fight had lacked any semblance of tension. It had been a real pushover. They both felt energized and ready for more.

“Then come on, floor five! What’ll be next?”

“I can’t wait!”

A new island had appeared. They headed toward it and stepped on the magic circle.

A moment later, they were bathed in light—which gave way to the sights of the fifth floor.

They found themselves in darkness, the paths lined with gravestones—all of which gave off an eerie blue light.

“M-Maple...a-about that break...”

“...Yeah, okay.”

Their enthusiasm sure drained quick. Maple saw how nervous Sally was and decided it was better for them to call it a day.



Defense Build and Tower's Fifth Floor

The next day, they were back on the fifth floor.

There was a reason they'd waited a whole day.

Sally simply could not handle anything remotely scary, and merely walking around this floor would be too much for her—if they were going to have any chance of getting through it, they needed Atrocity's protection.

They didn't yet know what this floor would have in store for them, so in the interest of safety, they made their preparations on the island below, then took the transport circle back up.

An ominous gloom with bobbing blue wisps in the distance waited for them. Maple figured it would be like the sixth stratum: full of ghosts and skeletons.

"Okay! Let's just charge on through!"

"Make it quick..."

In monster form—yet still sporting angel wings—Maple hefted a wooden box on her back, secured with rope. In the box, Sally was all curled up, unable to see a thing.

Maple took a step forward—and the graves let off a blue light. A pale ghost appeared before her.

"Yikes, one already!"

"I-I don't wanna know!"

Maple sped up to escape the ghost, racing across the wasteland.

Rotting and/or bony arms rose from the ground to impede her progress, but Maple just kicked them to pieces mid-stride.

"Uh-oh, more ghosts— Burn!"

She breathed fire, doing damage, but not enough to defeat them. The ghosts

attacked back, spewing a black mist.

Caught off guard, Maple soaked it head-on!

“Did that do damage? Nope! Then I’m outta here!”

If they weren’t a threat, then she could just ignore them and keep running.

But she felt rather sluggish, and they were closing in.

“.....? Oh! My stats!”

Maple’s STR and AGI were usually 0, so she didn’t have to worry about penalties to them. But since her Atrocity form *did* have those stats, the debuffs suddenly mattered.

Her VIT was so apocryphally absurd no matter how bad the reduction got, so it didn’t actually change anything, but now she was slow enough that she couldn’t outrun the ghosts.

And then one of them passed through the walls of the wooden box.

“Eek! No... Why?!”

“Sorry! I’m getting us outta here!”

As more ghost attacks hit, she breathed fire and ran.

Her stats might be dropping, but she still wasn’t taking damage.

But the ropes holding the box were just ordinary items.

“Augh...!”

She felt a weight lift off her back and heard a clatter as the box containing Sally rolled away.

“No, don’t— Aiiieee!”

When she tried to pick up the box, hands reached out of the ground and grabbed Maple. She tried to shake them off, but her STR was now too low to manage it.

“Augh...they won’t let go!”

The hands started dragging Maple into the dirt. There was a cave underground, and that’s where Maple landed.

Only the box was left up above.

“M-Maple...are you there?”

Sally was nervous enough without all this silence. The box was on its side, and she cracked the lid open—and found herself staring into a pair of empty eye sockets.

“Hnyaaaa!”

Her body jerked involuntarily, knocking the lid off and sending her rolling out.

She had no choice but to look at what was waiting for her—countless hands reaching from the ground, ghosts floating in from all directions.

“Urgh! Why? How?!” she wailed.

Sally broke into a run, for the simple reason that she couldn’t deal.

“I fled the sixth stratum to be here! It’s not fair!”

Completely forgetting to use her skills, she simply ran, hoping only to get away from all these monsters and log out. She could do that anytime—if she wasn’t engaged in combat.

“Log out! Log out!”

She’d never run this fast in all her life. Not even remembering that Maple was still out there, she raced across the wasteland.

Maple saw Sally log out and didn’t even bother dropping Atrocity. She just used her monster limbs to open her menus and eject herself from the tower. Outside, she waited for Sally.

A while later, Sally logged back in, looking guilty.

“Let’s try again without me dropping you,” Maple said.

“Yeah...”



While the fifth floor was impeding the two of them, the rest of Maple Tree’s members were *also* tackling the area—*also* on the highest difficulty.

Mai’s and Yui’s bonkers DPS had proven to be a valuable weapon, and the others had spent the first four floors keeping the twins safe. When the enemy

stopped moving, they'd buffed them like mad and pointed them toward it. They'd made steady progress.

But the fifth floor had enemies the twins couldn't beat.

"More! Hit 'em with elemental attacks! Kasumi, Kanade!"

Translucent ghosts darted toward them, ignoring all ordinary damage.

Mai and Yui still weren't exactly practiced hands at combat, and hitting foes this fast at all was a real challenge for them. Thus, the others were taking point.

"On it! Armored Arms!"

One of the skills from the blighted blade Kasumi had found on the fourth stratum, this summoned giant arms on either side of her, each covered in armor and holding a massive katana.

The one on the right was wreathed in purple fire and moved in sync with Kasumi's own blade, dealing fire damage with every hit.

The price for this was a temporary 20-percent drop to all stats, but the benefits more than made up for that, and she was making short work of the ghosts.

"That's so good! I guess I'll throw out some spells..." Kanade said, focusing on distant opponents.

While they kept the elemental attacks going, Chrome aggressively threw himself in front of anything that came at Mai and Yui.

Unlike Maple, he did take damage—but he wasn't letting anything reach the twins.

"I can heal with the best of them!"

Iz was using items to heal him up, and his HP kept dropping and refilling like crazy.

"Hmm, any minute now. Kasumi! Watch your feet!"

"Yes, I know. I'm on it."

The same ghouls that had dragged Maple underground came after them, but they knew how to keep themselves free.

Chrome and Kasumi had the raw STR to rip the arms out of the ground. Iz and Kanade were nimbly dodging. And nothing could ever bind Mai and Yui.

The threat was easily thwarted.

“The underground route’s a pain in the butt. I’ve got a much easier job tanking up here, so make sure we don’t get caught.”

“Yes, sir! Um...but you’ll have to handle the fights on the way.”

“Regular attacks work on the boss, so you just keep yourselves safe till then.”

“We’ll beat the boss for you!” the twins said, flourishing their hammers.

“We know you will. I’ll get some spells ready that should pave the road for you.”

Kanade glanced over his shelves of grimoires, thinking.



They fended off several more waves of enemies that tried to drag them underground but made steady progress.

“Wonder how Maple and Sally are doing?”

“This is a bad floor for them.”

“Depends on how Sally’s handling it. If they figure out a way around her hang-up...”

But they all knew what a disaster the sixth stratum had been for her.

As they talked, the terrain began to shift.

“Mm, eyes up—the fog’s thickening. We’re in the next zone,” Kasumi called.

Thick white mist coated the area, and before they knew it, they could barely see a few yards in front of them.

“In actuality, even less visibility than I expected.”

“We’ll have to be really careful. There’s still not much info on this sector.”

Kasumi led the way through the misty hush, followed by Kanade, Iz, Chrome, and the twins.

“This silence is extra ominous. Right, Chrome? Chrome?”

Hearing no reply, Iz turned to look—and saw no one behind her.

“Kanade! Kasumi! ...Uh-oh.”

When she turned back around, the other two were gone.

“I knew it. It *was* a trap.”

Iz wasn’t much good on her own. She opened up her map to be sure, but the position markers for the rest of her party weren’t showing up. No way to tell where they were.

Iz sent a message to see how they were faring.

Once everyone checked in, they decided to keep exploring like this—at least until someone went down.

“But I’d much rather avoid actually fighting...”

She *could* attack, but this deep into the game's latest event, there were lots of enemies who weren't gonna be fazed by a tiny little hammer.

Yet they seemed disinclined to let her get away. A whole swarm of zombies was emerging from the ground around her.

"So many... Argh, I'm not even gonna get enough mats to justify it."

But Iz resigned herself to the losses, opened up her Magic Workshop, and started mass-producing bombs.

"Output boost crystals...and flamethrowers..."

She could convert money into materials and craft anywhere, so Iz did not often run out of attack items.

"My poor stockpile...and my cash reserve..."

Eyes glazed over, Iz threw bomb after bomb. Flames and explosions lit up the fog.



While Iz was starting her solo fight, Mai and Yui found themselves together but isolated from the others in the mist.

"Wh-what now, Mai?! Chrome's disappeared!"

The mist had closed behind them, and just like that—he'd vanished. They'd lunged forward but found nothing ahead but fog.

"We've...just gotta survive. I'm sure we'll meet up again before too long!"

They looked around anxiously—and Iz's message arrived.

"It's from Iz! Um...Yui! Keep an eye out!"

"Mm, will do!"

Mai typed up a response, and a few quick back-and-forths later, they were on the same page.

"Yui, um, Kanade and Kasumi are paired up, but Chrome and Iz both ended up solo. Seems like this is some sort of trap."

"What do we do?"

“Keep going until someone gets taken out. We’ve gotta look for...maybe an exit? Some way to get back together.”

Without Chrome around to protect them, they would have to look after themselves.

Iz had given them some items that would temporarily apply the fire element to their weapons, so they used those and then a Doping Seed that boosted STR, enabling them to take out any monsters in a single blow.

Then they put their backs together, hammers at the ready.

“I’ve got your back, Mai!”

“Mm! Let’s do this!”

Hammers wreathed in flames, ready to pound away, they began inching through the fog.

“Keep an eye on your feet, Yui.”

“Mm, I know, but...if they pop out at us, there’s not much I can do.”

Their survival required that they got in the first hit. If anything dodged their initial salvo, they’d immediately be in big trouble.

“Hmm... Oh! Mai, I just had a great idea!”

“.....Wh-what is it?”

Yui looked very confident, and that just made Mai nervous.



As anxious as the twins were, Kanade and Kasumi weren’t. They were mowing down the monsters around them.

“With this many coming at us, the left arm gets a workout, too!”

As Kasumi finished her swing, the bulky arms flanking her began theirs.

The left arm might not have an element on it, but it could easily slice and dice any regular monster.

“I’ll focus on defending us,” Kanade said. “You seem to have DPS covered.”

He was assigning priorities to the approaching mobs and firing targeted delay

spells, giving Kasumi breathing room to recover and defend.

Kanade was the most versatile member of Maple Tree, while Kasumi was the most stable performer. Her offensive output wasn't just good in short bursts—she could consistently put out a withering amount of damage for a long time.

And together, they could roflstomp zombies and ghosts no matter how outnumbered they were.

“If their numbers increase any more, you might wanna lay down an AOE.”

“Got it. Hmm, which one, though...?”

Kanade glanced over the spines of the books on the floating shelves around him.

“One that won't hit me, too.”

“Obviously! I'm not using *that* here,” he said, his eyes glancing at an inky-black spine in the corner.

“Good. No way to tell which way is which, so I guess we just wander until the others get in touch again.”

“Sounds right to me. Hope they stay safe.”

“I feel like Chrome's gonna have a rough go of it solo. Let's hope it doesn't kill him.”

Even as Kasumi spoke, her blade sliced through another undead.



As she predicted, Chrome was feeling a little overwhelmed.

“Argh, so many zombies! They won't stop spawning!”

All he could do was block attacks with his great shield and cut them down one at a time with his cleaver. He kept finding himself surrounded and barely managing to break out.

“At least they aren't exactly nimble...”

But while he was definitely struggling, he wasn't really anywhere close to dying. Life Eater, Soul Syphon, and Battle Healing all helped restore his health as fast as it dropped.

“They can’t keep up, huh? But what next?”

They’d chip away at him, and he’d heal himself back up, steadily thinning their numbers.

He was arguably more archetypically undead than the zombies around him.

“Definitely wanna find someone soon...and I’m worried about the twins.”

Were Mai and Yui holding up on their own?

Chrome’s blade decapitated a monster, and his HP topped itself back up.

He also had skills that nulled all damage or revived him if he did die—it would take one heck of a trash mob to down him.

“.....I’m pretty tough, huh?”

This fight was really driving that home. And reminding him that Maple’s approach wasn’t exactly typical Great Shielder stuff.

And so, all four groups used their strengths and weathered the zombie hordes.



All parties foraged on through the fog.

The first to emerge were Kasumi and Kanade.

“At last.”

“I never did use that AOE spell!”

Kasumi had mowed down their foes with such ease that all he’d cast was healing and support spells.

They’d never needed his area attack magic.

“These are a huge boost to offense. The stat penalty is significant...but it triples my hits and is easy enough to plan around.”

And increased offensive capabilities were vital in Maple Tree.

Largely because no players or monsters could get through Maple’s ironclad defense and actually kill a guild member.

“Even without that, the way you fought, you oughtta be just fine. But what

next? Nobody's died yet."

"Guess we wait here? They might all join us soon."

"True. Doesn't seem like there're any monsters spawning."

They waited awhile and then began hearing a series of enormous booms.

A moment later, Iz came tumbling out of the fog, chugging a potion, a pile of bombs under one arm.

"Huff...huff...I'm free?"

"You're safe! Amazing."

"Really did a number on my materials and money. I'm not gonna be able to make new items for a while here..."

Iz plunked herself down on the ground, glaring balefully at the fog behind her.

She'd made herself a pile of bombs and attack items, scattering them in her wake as she ran, and traded gold for any materials she lacked. The flurry of items had literally blown the horde away.

"Survival is paramount. I can help you stock back up. Your items also help me out, after all."

"I would definitely appreciate it."

"Hey, Kasumi, someone else's coming."

Kanade's ears had caught the whoosh of something swinging, and he peered into the mist.

Not long after, he caught sight of four red glows, swinging wildly, tearing the fog asunder.

"Mai! Yui!"

"Oh, at last! We're out, Mai! Whoa!"

"Uh-oh, Yui! Augh!"

They'd had their backs to each other, spinning like a top, and the moment they saw the others, they both fell flat on their faces.

With the flame attribute applied to their hammers, their whirling-blender-of-

death strategy had annihilated anything that got near them.

If you couldn't react to an attack reliably, then the best approach was to ensure that you were *always* delivering a fatal blow.

"You girls okay?"

"Ugh...kinda dizzy..."

"Iz, I...I may have overdone it a bit..."

But since their deathnado had left no monsters standing, they'd come to no harm.

"Only Chrome left. I'm sure he's fine."

"Yeah. His resilience is certified."

By the time the twins' heads stopped spinning, Chrome finally emerged from the mist.

"Whew...I'm last?"

"See, he's totally fine."

"Not even a sliver of health missing."

"Yeah, well, I was surrounded the entire time but somehow stayed alive. Got stuck carving my way out so many times, I leveled up."

Chrome insisted Maple Tree members were a bit *too* good at fighting crowds.

Iz wasn't even a combat-oriented build, but she'd still made it through, so he certainly had a point.

That had been pretty obvious since they'd gone toe to toe with much larger guilds in the fourth event.

"You're plenty out there yourself, Chrome—just in a very different direction."

"Yeah, most people can't break out once they're surrounded."

They'd incurred no casualties from the party-split trap and were back together again. Once more, they ventured forth.

"Ahead of us, there're monsters with instant-death spells, so best hold on to these," Iz said, giving everyone a ring with a red jewel embedded in it. "They're

Surrogate Rings. They'll tank an instant-death effect for you three times."

"...Never heard of 'em," Chrome said, frowning at it.

"They're brand-new. Made 'em with the mats those zombies dropped. Heh-heh. And they helped pay for more bombs."

Between Magic Workshop and New Frontier, Iz could make items nobody else could from wherever she was, so drops she found along the way might suddenly turn into high-spec gear or items.

"This should help a lot."

"Yeah, I can save the resistance-spell grimoire for later."

"Let's move out. Looks like splitting up won't hurt us much, but the traps from below are still bad news, so keep an eye out for those."

Wary of more traps they didn't know about, Kasumi and Kanade took the lead again, handling any monster attacks.

Mai and Yui huddled up with Iz behind Chrome.

"Kasumi's getting good with those arms. The fog proved to be good training," Chrome said.

Since no monsters were getting back to him, he had time to watch her fight, even as he kept the twins covered.

"We're almost to the boss. Everyone ready?"

"We're good! O-oh, Iz, those fire-attribute items you gave us were really helpful."

"I noticed when you came spinning out. That strategy was...uh, eye-opening."

That seemed like a bit of an understatement, given they'd been holding hammers at arm's length and spinning in tandem, but maybe it just showed Iz was getting used to crazy.

As they talked, they pushed deeper into the fifth floor.

The monsters along the way proved no threat to Maple Tree, even without Maple and Sally around.

It wasn't much longer before the six of them found themselves outside the boss's territory.

"I'm told no monsters spawn here."

"Then let's get ready. Kasumi and I will keep watch just in case."

"Good plan."

While Chrome and Kasumi eyed their surroundings, Kanade and Iz began buffing the twins.

"This and this, then drink this."

"Munch. Gulp..."

"Pfahhh! Okay!"

A variety of edibles and potions went down the hatch, and Kanade cast some extra buffs on them—at this point, this was just how they started boss fights.

Once they were done, their bodies were aglow with all sorts of colorful auras.

""Ready when you are!""

"Okay, then let's do this. I'll take the lead."

When the twins raised their iridescent hammers, they charged into the boss zone.

Like the trap territory, the zone they entered was a wasteland blanketed in thick fog. No obstructions or cover, just an open area for the boss fight.

Detecting their approach, a headless horseman reared up, emerging from the fog.

Blue flames burned where the head should be. It wore old armor, carried a huge sword, and rode a zombie horse.

The horse let out a whinny and charged.

"Come on, Mai!"

"Mm...!"

"I'll force an opening! Hah!"

Chrome thrust out his shield, parrying the boss's blade and making it flinch.

And as it did, four hammers glowing every bit as bright as the boss's flames pounded home.

""Double Strike!""

Their hammers struck against the armor, and its HP dropped like a stone. The boss raised the sword one more time, but Chrome batted it aside.

"Now for my new item—"

Iz darted forward and planted an item in the dirt near the horse. An instant later, there was a crack—and lightning raced across the ground.

For a few scant seconds, the boss was unable to move—and that was all Maple Tree required.

"Yui! One more!"

"You got it!"

Kasumi's role was to step in if Chrome couldn't make it in time—but she never even got a chance. The twins crumpled the boss, and it burst into a shower of light.

"Whew...they sure change this game. Like Maple, but in their own way."

Kasumi may not have had a chance to do anything, but the twins were thrilled to have their chance to shine and were busy celebrating.

"Totally get that," Chrome said. All *he'd* done was parry the boss's strikes twice. "Still, they definitely need a good tank guarding them. If we won easily, it's 'cause I did my job right."

Chrome and Kasumi could not easily be downed with numbers, so they had shone on the path leading here. Mai and Yui were arguably specced for boss fights alone.

"I'm gonna restock the items we used," Iz said, opening her workshop. She started crafting buff items, MP potions, and bombs.

Since she could convert gold into items and deploy her workshop anywhere, they never ran out of anything.

Pre-battle, in battle, and post-battle, their guild was always unique.

They headed up to the next floor, ready to pulverize another boss.

“Let’s hope Maple’s still making good progress.”

“She’ll figure something out. I can’t see anything stopping her for long.”

“True dat.”



Not long after the other guild members tore through the boss like tissue paper, Maple found herself fighting the same boss.

She’d activated Atrocity and was in full monster mode, tearing the zombie horse apart with her hideous limbs.

The room was dotted with pale blue flames, zombie adds, and dual-wielding mounted knights.

It was like a scene fresh outta hell—and there was *no* sign of Sally.

Maple was all on her own, kicking zombies out of the way, tackling them, trampling them, clearing a path for herself.

This boss had no piercing attacks or other tricky skills, and it had no way of denting Maple’s health, so it was gradually inching closer to its own demise.

“Okay! This oughtta end it!”

It never changed up its attack patterns, so she just waded in head-on and racked up another victory.

“Um...how do we get to the sixth floor...? Here!”

Maple lumbered over to the transport circle.

The view before her eyes transformed. The blighted wastelands of the fifth floor were replaced with rocky cave walls dotted with sparkling crystals.

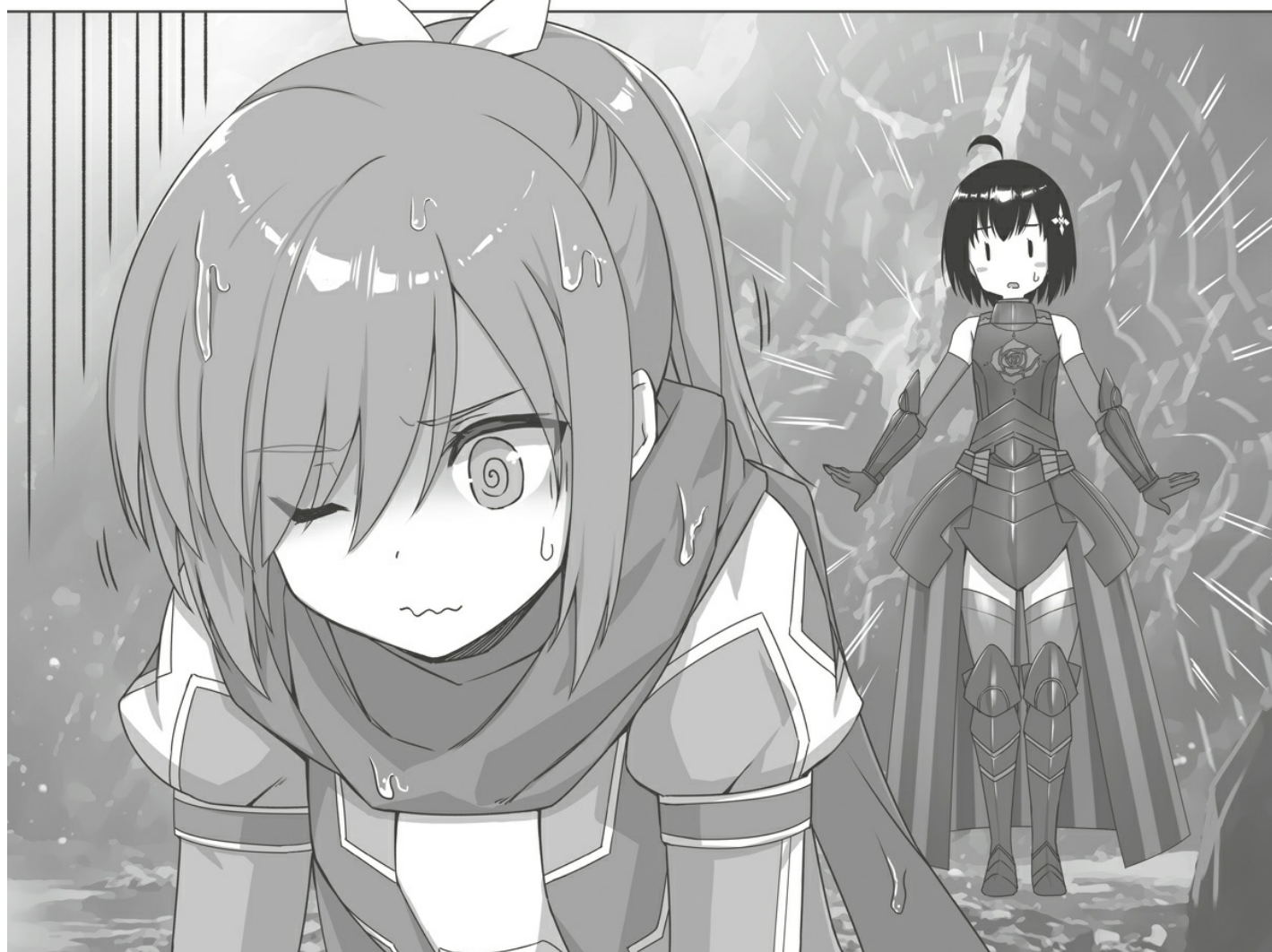
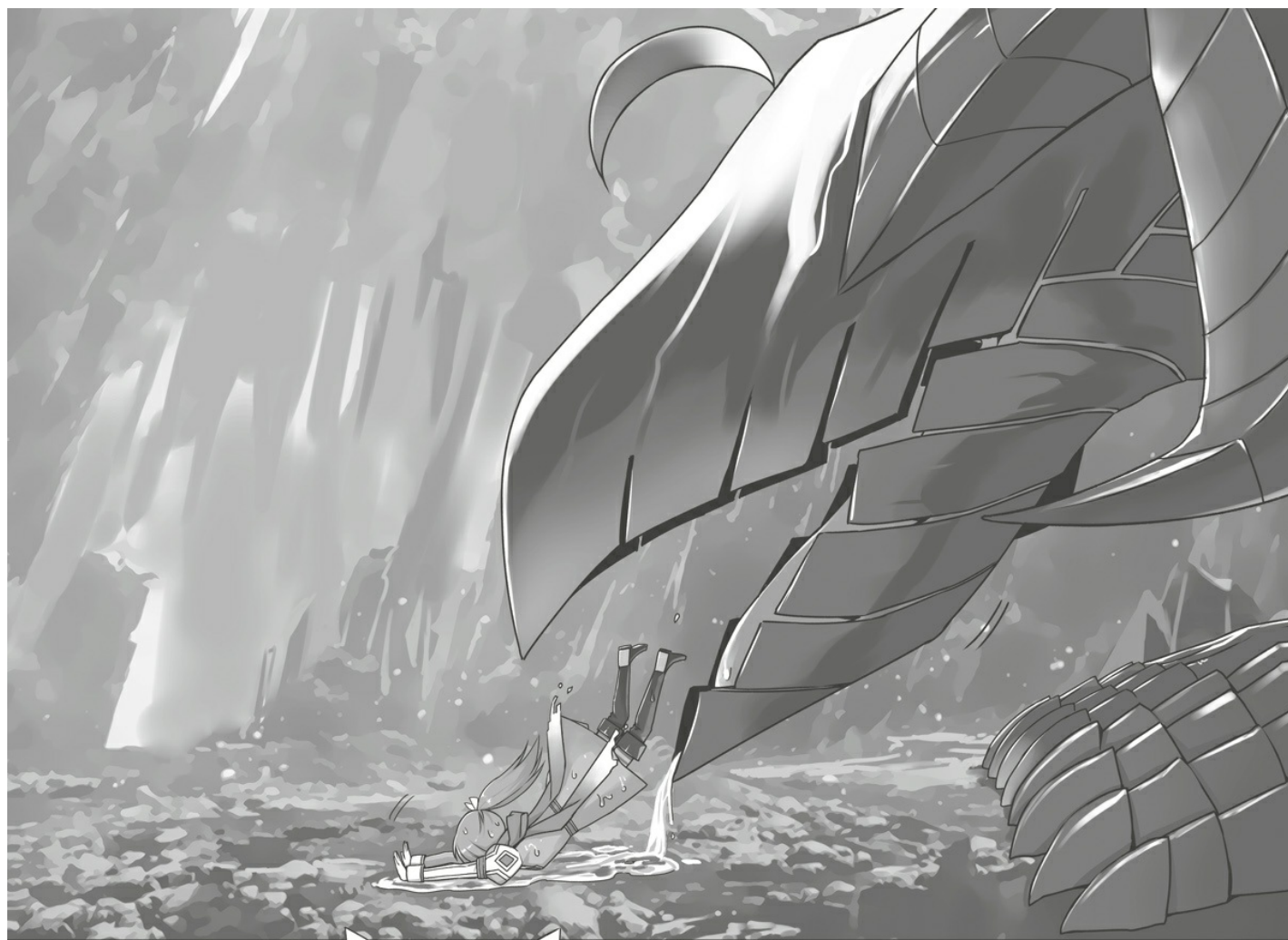
“Okay! It’s safe now! You can come out, Sally.”

Maple opened her gaping maw as wide as it would go, and Sally came tumbling out with an audible squelch.

“Urp...major motion sickness...”

Her eyes were spinning, and she wasn't getting up.

Sally had been *inside* Maple's mouth the whole time—as she stampeded across the fifth floor.



Maple herself reverted to human form, came over, and knelt down beside Sally, looking proud of herself.

“But we got through it without you seeing *anything*!”

“Ugh...running this tower was my idea; I’m so sorry it ended up like this.”

“Don’t be! Like you always say, the right girl for the right job. We all have stuff we can’t handle.”

“Mm...”

“But those late-night phone calls *are* a bit rough.”

“R-right...! I won’t do that anymore.”

“Eh-heh-heh. You’ll have to keep *me* safe next time!”

“As long as it isn’t horror-themed...”

This bit of banter helped Sally settle down enough to right herself.

With Sally immobilized, they’d needed a plan that let Maple protect her. If keeping her in range wasn’t good enough, they needed her closer—*inside*.

It was like a monster version of her wool-ball tactic.

“The experience was pretty gnarly... Is that what it feels like to get eaten?”

“Oh, actually, I did get eaten once! That was a shocker!”

“Um...anyway, now I’m back in action. Right? This sixth floor is n-normal?”

Sally’s eyes darted furtively around the cave.

And a golem lumbered into view, its body glittering like a diamond.

“Whew...*just* a monster.”

“Heh-heh! You’ll just have to make up for downstairs!”

“You betcha. I’ll fight so hard, you can kick back and relax!”

With Sally feeling better, she and Maple started their conquest of the sixth floor.



The devs were busy monitoring event progress and making sure there were

no bugs with the floor mechanics or unique items. Everyone was relieved that no problems had cropped up yet.

“Who’s furthest along?”

“The Order of the Holy Sword just started floor nine.”

“Everyone else is still between five and seven. No problems anywhere yet.”

This was in line with expectations, so everyone nodded.

There were fewer players tackling the highest-difficulty version, but they were also the best players in the game. The tower needed to provide them a challenge, but not be *too* hard.

“Well, good. Were ten floors a bit much? We ended up using a scrapped sixth-stratum boss for the fifth floor...”

“Arguably, yeah...but the fifth floor is slowing people down like we wanted. I’d say the redundant motif is a bigger regret.”

Making ten new bosses and the maps to house them *was* a lot of work.

“The fifth floor is filled with monsters that can only be beat with elemental damage. Not something you get through easily.”

“Wanna check the feed?”

“Sure. Give us someone who seems like they’d plow right through it.”

A recorded playthrough went up on-screen, showing the leader of Flame Empire, Mii. Their guild had seen fit to put Mii, Misery, Marx, and Shin in a party together.

“Their top four, huh?”

“The Order’s taking the same approach.”

Two guilds that boasted strength high above *NWO*’s average and had no shortage of members—so they must have good reason to be running things this way.

But even with only four, Mii’s and Misery’s spells were a good match for the fifth-floor foes, and if anything got past them, Marx’s traps would stop them in their tracks, and Shin’s Splinter Sword—Misery had applied an elemental buff to

it—would cut them down.

With no tank, they were extremely dodge-reliant, but Misery's spells made healing *and* resurrection possible, so they were mowing down the trash mobs.

"Misery's got a skill to transfer MP, which lets them keep throwing out the big spells."

The feed was on the boss fight now, and it kept casting big blue fires, and Mii's flames were erupting all over, so the entire screen was covered in an inferno.

When the boss flinched, a trap bound it, and more flames consumed it. Shin was taking out the adds the moment they spawned, not giving them a chance to make a move.

And whatever damage the boss was doing was quickly countered by Misery's continual heal spell.

"That DPS is nuts."

"If she can keep her MP pool topped up, few players can match Mii. And it meshes well with Misery's and Marx's support skills, plus Shin's sheer quantity of hits."

Even as they watched, the boss was swallowed by a massive fireball and burst into light.

They gathered up their drop items and headed to the next floor—unlike Maple, their builds weren't based around skills with a daily use limit.

"At least the boss got some hits in. Basically what I expected."

"They *are* the group that spent the least time on floor five at the highest difficulty."

This boss concept might have been pulled from the rejection bin, but it had done its job.

It just never stood a chance against *these* players.

They checked a few more recordings, but there weren't many players who had made it through the fifth floor on their first try.

“Wanna look at Maple? She’s made it through.”

“Yeah...well, we’ve seen everyone else.”

Bracing themselves for anything, they pulled up the vid and watched Maple stomp around in Atrocity form. The boss’s attacks were all hitting home, but since they weren’t piercing, they bounced off harmlessly. But the video showed no signs of her teammate.

“Where’s Sally?”

“Um. Good question.”

They checked over the feed and soon located her.

“...Inside her mouth?”

“...Apparently. Technically doable!”

But hiding a friend in your monstrous maw was not a typical tactic.

And they weren’t sure why she wasn’t just using Martyr’s Devotion.

“I will never understand Maple.”

“She’s just being her.”

They agreed they’d never really understood any of her choices.

“Oh, is this why? Sally has spent basically zero playtime on the sixth stratum.”

“That might explain it. Still...”

It was easy enough to assume someone just couldn’t handle horror zones. But the gulf between that and hiding in your friend’s oral cavity was insurmountable.

They watched the fight end and Maple spit Sally out, then decided it was time to stop watching videos and go back to work.

“I wonder what it’s like in there...”

“Wanna try?”

“Let’s not.”

Everyone watching shuffled off, shaking their heads.



Defense Build and Tower's Sixth Floor

On the sixth floor, our heroines found raw rock walls, bumpy ground, and pale blue crystals studded everywhere. The color was awfully reminiscent of ice and reminded them of the frozen realm they'd conquered earlier. Relieved it did not seem obviously haunted, they began working their way through it.

The first enemy they faced was a golem made entirely of sparkly gemstone.

Maple took a step back. This was not her forte. But the path was too narrow for them to push past.

"Looks like I'm up already! Maple, watch my back."

"Yup. Good luck, Sally!"

The golem appeared quite hard, so Sally started with Defense Break. Maple provided some cover fire, but the rounds bounced right off. Not only did it have high defense, it also had a *lot* of HP. Sally was forced to chisel it down.

When it finally fell, they gathered up the materials it had dropped and sighed.

"Urgh...what a sponge..."

"Sigh. So tanky, too..."

The jeweled golem was just a basic-ass enemy, but none of Maple's attacks had worked, and even Sally had no choice but to abuse her piercing skill.

But thanks to Martyr's Devotion, it hadn't been able to get through their defense, either.

"With you tanking for us, we'll always win eventually, but unless they look like they're carrying a key item, we're better off just slipping past."

"Key what now...?"

"Like that Firn thing. I guess we can just go till we get stuck and then turn back to look."

“True.”

Fighting them would just take *time*. Even if their materials were good, it was too inefficient to gather anything, and not much point beating them otherwise.

“What if the boss is like this? Ewww.”

“Then I’ll work my butt off. I did promise to make up for the last floor...”

“Well, I’ll keep us safe, then.”

They moved on, spying a fork up ahead.

And as if waiting for them, soldier-type monsters appeared, their bodies made of glittering ore.

Three in a row, armed with shields and spears, blocking one of the paths.

“I *guess* we could push past, but...what do you think?”

“Let’s go the other way. They’re clearly all tanks.”

Maple almost pushed Sally into the other passage.

“At your speed, you’re not exactly outrunning anything—so they must be the type that doesn’t give chase.”

“Well, good! That’s always nice.”

“Guess we’ll just see where this path takes us. Avoiding combat as we do.”

“Cool! The less monsters the better...”

But Maple’s wish was not granted. This place was a maze, and there were forks galore—and every time, monsters blocked one of the options.

“Is the path *with* monsters the right choice? Hmm. But there’s no clear evidence of that...”

“What do you think? Should we fight ’em once and see?”

“The branches are all getting marked properly, so we’re good for now. It’s a maze, but we don’t know which way is right, so we’re at a loss either way. Best thing to do is go till we hit a dead end and then start checking the other options.”

“Makes sense.”

Avoiding combat as much as they could, they headed farther and farther in, filling in the floor map.

Eventually this route took them to a large room, the last blank bit on their maps.

“Doesn’t...quite seem like a boss room...”

“I can see more paths leading out the other side, so no. But I bet *something* hits us here. Brace yourself.”

“Okay. Sally, you stay behind me.”

Maple took a step into the room—and there was a clank behind them. A pale crystal wall blocked their retreat.

Similar crystals emerged from the floor and walls—along with a dizzying number of monsters.

“Augh, a monster house!”

A famous trap type that spawned a *ton* of monsters the moment you stepped in, testing your ability to deal with overwhelming numbers.

“Huh? What?!”

“This is real bad! Gotta go one at a time, or...”

Since Maple’s attacks didn’t work, Sally would have to do all the heavy lifting—but there were far too many foes to just throw herself at them without a plan. Several of these monsters she’d never even seen before, and she was instantly worried about piercing damage. When she saw Maple dithering, Sally grabbed her hand and pulled her back to what remained of the way in. At least none of these enemies seemed to have ranged attacks.

“Um, best if their attacks can’t reach us, right?”

“Yeah, if that’s doable. But...”

Wool sprouted from Maple’s body, filling up the short passageway.

Sally was now between the crystal blocking the exit and this new wall of fluff. Maple’s face popped out.

“They’re really pounding away behind me, but I’m fine!”

“Whew...cool. This oughtta help. I’m coming in, Maple. Can’t exactly throw myself into that mob. It’s gonna take a while, but I’ll just have to go one at a time.”

“Come on in! Welcome to Café Wool!”

“Yeah, yeah. Lemme wriggle through.”

Sally squirmed into the ball and popped her face out the other side. Maple used Taunt to pull most of the enemies, and Sally stuck out her arms, using Iz’s items to boost her damage and slicing away, one enemy after another.

If they eliminated the threat of piercing attacks, there was nothing to fear.

“As long as the enemies don’t have fire, this is really effective.”

“The fluffy fortification!”

“That’s...not even an oxymoron.”

Bantering while fighting was definitely a luxury Maple brought to the table.

For a while, the sound of Sally’s daggers striking gemstone echoed through the room, but gradually their numbers thinned, and finally she downed the last of the monsters she didn’t recognize.

“Whew...the rest is just a battle of attrition.”

“Oh, are we done?”

“There’re still the monsters who *don’t* do piercing attacks. It’s a chore, but... the door behind us is still closed. So!”

Sally popped out of the fluff ball and started swinging daggers around the much-roomier space. Each enemy moved so slowly that once she’d thinned their numbers, they were not really a problem. No chance of stray hits. She had enough room within range of Maple’s cover to fight how she pleased.

“Keep it up, Sally! N-not that I can see you...”

Maple had ducked back into her wool, fumbling around. As long as Martyr’s Devotion was active, she was doing her bit.

While she was in there, she heard the shattering sound of monster after monster going down.

Like Sally said, it was just a matter of attrition. Eventually—and with no danger—she had all foes beat.

“Nice, Sally!”

“Good workout. And they left a ton of materials! The wall behind you vanished, too.”

“What now, Sally? Keep going?”

“Yeah, let’s hit the far end, at least. We might find something there.”

Since Maple could spawn her wool only once daily, they decided to keep it.

No telling if there were more monster houses up ahead.

“...I could roll you?”

“Give me a push!”

Sally shoved her hands into Maple’s wool and started rolling her down the corridor.

The rest of the passage had no more forks, and it led to a little dais with a small chest on it.

“What do you reckon, Maple?”

“It’s very suspicious, but leaving without opening it is worse.”

“Agreed. Let’s run a few tests.”

Sally fired a spell at the chest, making sure it wasn’t a monster in disguise, and then carefully checked it for traps.

“Seems okay.”

“Cool. Then let’s open it up!”

They reached for the lid together.

No traps activated, and they breathed sighs of relief, peering in. There, they found two scrolls—the type that gave you skills.

“Looks like they’re both the same. One’s yours!”

“Great! I wonder what skill it is?”

Crystallization

Halves AGI for one minute but blocks all status effects.

Three-minute cooldown.

Condition: VIT: 100+

Maple definitely fell prey to status effects sometimes, and this would solve that problem. And she didn't need to worry about AGI drops at all, so it just got rid of a weakness.

"I think I'll give mine to Chrome. I sure can't ever use it."

Sally had kept her VIT at a big ol' 0. And with no plans to ever raise it, 100 was entirely unobtainable.

"I'm gonna learn it right now!"

Maple unrolled the scroll and acquired the Crystallization skill.

"No monsters around. Wanna give it a shot before we hit combat?"

"Good idea! Crystallization!"

Maple was wreathed in light, applying a coating to her exterior—just like the monsters they'd been fighting.

"My whole skin changed! But I can still move. It feels weird."

"Definitely...and it applied to this, too."

Sally thumped the wool. It made a clanking sound—and it even *felt* like a mass of rock.

"If you pull your face in, will you get stuck?"

"Erp? Now I'm scared to try... Eek, my arm *is* stuck! I can't get back in!"

"Wow..."

Maple wriggled around a bit and discovered that the entire surface of the ball was now hard, and it echoed when she knocked.

"Welp, the main point is protection against status effects, so...this usually *wouldn't* happen."

Sally took another look at Maple's predicament, stuck piteously in a rock-hard ball of wool, and shook her head.

"Urg...too many things to remember."

"But that's what makes it fun!"

Maple didn't seem too sure she'd ever get used to this. They waited until the effect wore off.

They'd found a few skills and items in this tower and definitely needed to make time to try them out. On the skill front, both Cataclysmic Eruption and Crystallization might prove useful to Maple in the future.

"But beating this tower gets us medals, and we can trade those for skills, right? No telling if it'll be the same selection as before."

"Oh! Right... Hngg. I'll have to think real hard and make a good choice."

"Or just pick whatever you like the look of. Go with your gut! I feel like you usually do pretty well that way. But if you ask me which skills are good, I'm always happy to explain."

There was no point thinking about it now, so Maple just nodded.

Eventually Crystallization wore off, and they started exploring again.

"Guess we'll have to take the paths past the spear guys."

"Ugh. I bet those do piercing damage..."

"Then best you stay wooled up. Do the shield sandwich."

"You're sure? It's got spooky hands."

".....Go for it."

After her harrowing experience on the fifth floor, hands that didn't actively jump out at her just didn't rate anymore. And part of her thought she'd *better* learn to handle something that insignificant.

"Okay! Let me just change up my gear...and off we go!"

Once the wool ball was pinned between two shields, Sally climbed on top and looked ahead. If there were no flame jets, they could fly around the dungeon

like this.

But not long after...

Sally was lying in a heap on top of the wool, looking exhausted.

“I don’t wanna find any more big rooms...”

“Yeah...they’ve got so many monsters...”

Every large room on this floor was a monster house.

Each time they found a new one, the entrance sealed itself off, and monsters poured out of the woodwork.

Fortunately, they were all basic brute-force types that just charged in, so as long as the girls avoided anything that did piercing damage, they could handle it—but since these foes were pretty tanky and they didn’t have much to fight that with, it took forever.

“But thanks to you, I’m not getting hit at all! That helps!”

“Heh-heh... Well, it was worth the effort.”

Sally collected her wits and pulled her face out of the wool.

“I bet the boss is an even *bigger* chore.”

“Ugh...let’s cross our fingers and hope it’s a wimp.”

For all their griping, the floor wasn’t throwing anything at them that they couldn’t handle. It took a while, but they did eventually reach the boss room.

“What do you think, Sally? We doing this now?” Maple asked, popping her head out of the wool ball.

“Odds are high your attacks won’t work, Maple. But we can’t really be sure if we don’t take a look...so we might as well.”

“Works for me!”

They came up with some new strategies that let Syrup and Oboro help, checked over their item stocks, then were ready to hit the boss room. They’d decided to wait and see what the boss did before activating Martyr’s Devotion.

They pushed the boss room’s doors open and found a vast space beyond.

High ceilings, and the crystals above weren't just pale blue—there were red and green, too. A chunk of the floor was crystallized, with lumpy outcroppings a lot like Maple's Amethyst Geode. And at the very back—a man with a huge staff, robes, and a hat like a wizard. He was maybe five foot seven.

When he saw them enter, he thumped the base of his staff on the ground, summoning soldiers—each wearing crystal armor. Some had spears, some had shields, and some had swords—all three types charged toward them.

"Yikes, here we go, Sally!"

"Maple, stick to the plan! Take stock!"

"I remember! Syrup, Giganticize! Psychokinesis!"

Only Maple could retreat to the air above. Moments later, a giant wool ball—big enough for two!—was near the top of the dome on the back of a turtle.

Both girls peered over the edge.

"Yikes, way more than I expected."

"Wow! This is really something..."

The floor was teeming with crystal-armor soldiers. Even as they watched, the wizard boss was regularly summoning more.

"But with this many guards, the boss himself likely doesn't have much defense *or* HP."

"Then I'm good to go! Lemme make sure the poison doesn't splash back on us... Hydra!"

Maple stretched her short-sword hand out as far as she could and unleashed a torrent of poison. The boss threw up defensive walls in front of it. The poison passed through, but it bought the boss enough time to scramble out of range. This boss might be smart enough to handle attacks from above, but it didn't seem to have a way of fighting back—no counter came their way.

She tried the same attack a few more times, but to no avail.

"Urgh, what next, Sally? I can't hit this guy."

"But we did learn something. It's not that mobile, and it's pretty slow. If you

aim right, I think it'll work."

Sally checked the soldiers again, just to be sure, but they were still milling around right underneath. Seemed safe to ignore.

"Oh! Nice!"

"But we do need to stop it from summoning more. And then just go back and forth between the sky and the ground, hoping we can score some solid damage..."

Sally trailed off, thinking—so Maple put her own mind to work.

And soon after, she shot Sally a crafty smile.

"...Another one of your brilliant schemes?"

"I think so!"

For no real reason, Maple leaned in, whispering her plan.

Sally's eyes went wide; then she nodded. This was well worth trying.

"Okay. I'll handle the exit route."

"Thanks, Sally! You're the best!"

"And I wanna see how practical this is."

"Cool. Let's do this!"

Maple moved Syrup right over the boss's head, and Sally released the webs that were keeping them attached.

The wool ball plummeted down, and the boss tried to move aside—but Sally's webs shot out, adjusting their trajectory and ensuring they landed close by. And the instant they touched down, Maple's skill went off.

"Zone Freeze!"

With an audible snap, the ground around them froze solid—neither the boss nor its nearby minions could move.

Sally shot her webs near the boss again, yanking the ball of wool toward their immobilized foe.

"Sally, go for it!"

“Hokay!”

Together, they pushed the wool out of the way, and as the ball hit the boss, they reached out, pulling its upper half into the ball.

“Crystallization!”

The wool ball’s surface hardened—with the boss still stuck halfway inside. It was trapped!

Soldiers were soon banging away on the outside, but their blows couldn’t reach the girls now.

“Eh-heh-heh! It worked! Welcome to your doom!”

“Hi there. Nothing you’ll enjoy in here—and we got one whole minute.”

Sally and Maple were waiting inside the wool, and they were already rooting through their inventories.

And pulling out the powerful bombs Iz had made for them.

They filled the wool interior with items that might not have *that* much range but were all the more deadly for it.

“Oh, Sally, this is gonna be *loud*. Better use these earplugs.”

“Thanks! Time’s almost up.”

“Mm-hmm. Light ‘em!”

With Sally safe in range of Martyr’s Devotion, Maple set off the bombs. The boss area was rocked by explosions. Pillars of fire and sprays of damage sparks filled the air.

As Crystallization wore off, fire and lasers rocketed out of the wool ball, followed by bullets, ice, wind blades, and rock shards. The wool itself burned up in the process, but the sheer concentration of attacks also turned the boss to ash.

And as it died, so did all its minions.

“Definitely not that tanky. It melted.”

“Iz’s items are so strong!”

“Yeah, well...if you use *that* many... I almost felt sorry for the boss.”

“Survival of the fittest! This time, we were fitter.”

Luckily for the game’s bosses, she could use Wool Up only once a day, so the next boss would be spared...well...what appeared to be them blowing themselves up on top of it.

“Next?”

“You betcha! I still got loads of skills left.”

They headed to the seventh floor, ready to make short work of the next boss, too.



INTERMISSION

Defense Build and the Order of the Holy Sword

Earlier on, a different party was tackling the sixth floor long before Maple and Sally ever got there.

This party was always at the front lines of game conquest: Pain, Dread, Drag, and Frederica.

The Order of the Holy Sword's leaders were all so powerful, they were chewing through the bosses.

"Argh, Paaaain! Why is this all on meee?"

"Frederica, you agreed the four of us could handle it."

"Also, it was *your* idea?" Dread pointed out, eyes on their surroundings.

Frederica got real shifty. "Urgh...yeah, I guess..."

Since she made a regular habit of challenging Sally (and getting her ass handed to her), she'd heard that the two girls were planning on running the tower together.

So when she found the others talking about how to break up the teams for the event conquest, she'd jumped in, insisting that if Maple and Sally were clearing it with a party of two, they *had* to run it with a small party, too.

"And we're committed now, so you've gotta buckle down and do the work."

"You were all into the idea, too!"

"Maple Tree is running it with their top two. Running a small party of our finest will help us estimate their current abilities."

"Ha-ha, that does sound like *your* logic."

"And I'm just being competitive."

"Then we gotta do this thing! Oh, speak of the devil."

All four were instantly in combat mode, eyes on the approaching enemy.

Three crystal-clad soldiers, wielding spears and shields—and behind them stood an archer in the same armor.

“In such close quarters...how’s this?”

Drag jumped forward, swinging his ax sideways. It swept the shields and spears, cracking the crystals. The knockback sent the soldiers flying and rolling across the ground.

The archer behind them began its own attack—loosing three arrows at once, all coming at Drag.

“Multi-Barrier!”

Frederica’s defensive spell stopped all three arrows dead, and they fell harmlessly to the ground.

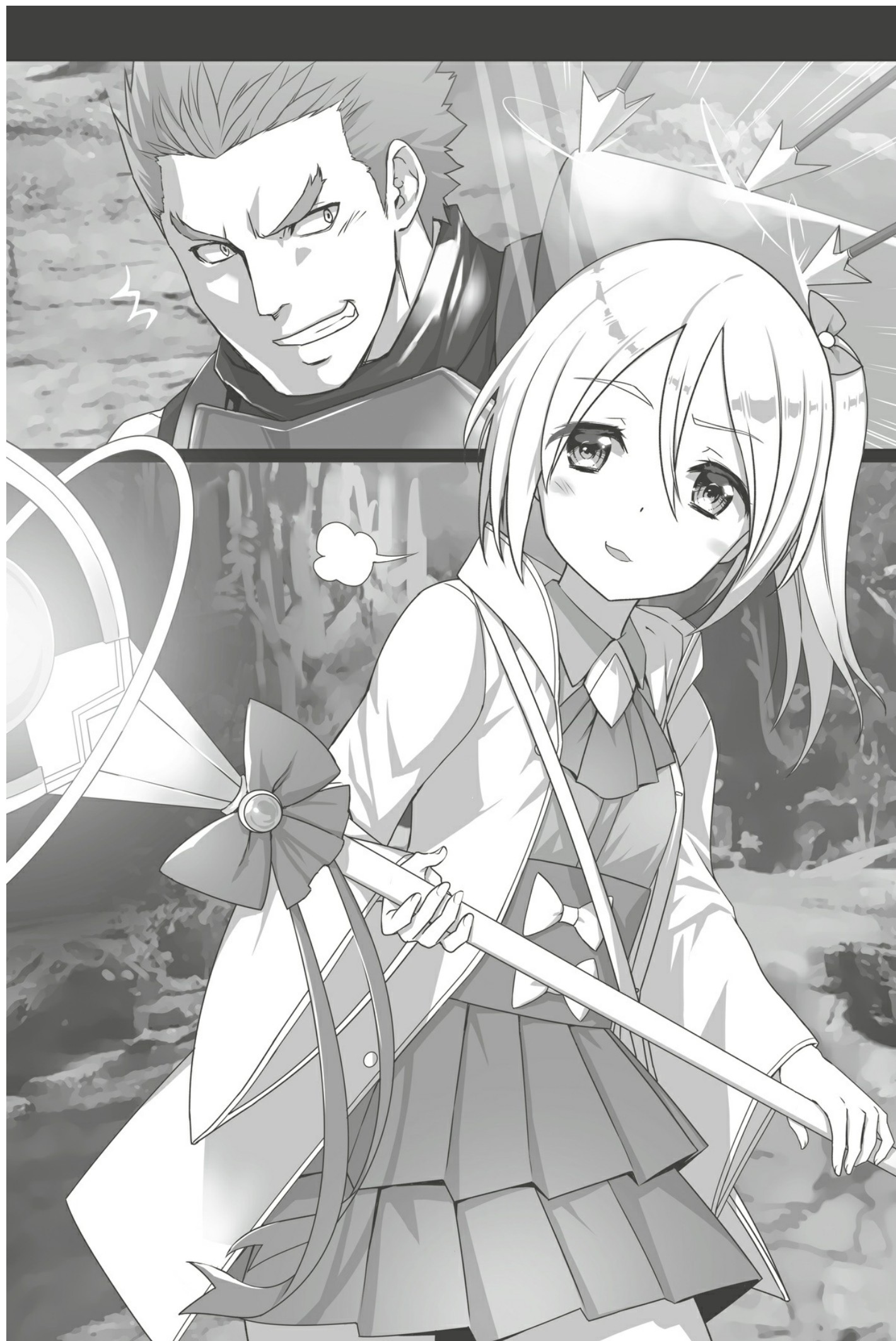
“Oh, thanks.”

“Careful on the offense! I’ve gotta defend *and* heal you, here!”

But as she grumbled, the spear soldiers got back up.

“Oh? No damage at all?”

“Gotta use pierce damage. Really tanky for trash mobs. Armor Piercer!” Dread yelled, lunging forward and thrusting his daggers into a soldier’s head—repeatedly. This skill enhanced all his attacks with piercing damage for a short time, and it was backed by a passive skill that boosted damage to heads, so he easily shattered one soldier and kept going toward the archer beyond.



“Triple Slash!”

Three strikes were enough to shatter the armor, and the rearguard archer burst into light.

The spear soldiers turned to follow him, but Drag’s ax hit their exposed backs.

“Armor Crusher!”

This time he *did* use a piercing skill. The remaining two soldiers fell to the ground with a crash—and their HP hit 0.

“Easier than I figured. Forcing us to use piercing skills does kinda suck, though.”

“Dread, that skill’s sweet! When’d you get that?”

“Recently. Dagger only. You can’t use it.”

“Awww. Shame.”

“Let’s keep moving. That’ll ease the burden on Frederica.”

“Agreed! It’d ease it even more if Drag knew the meaning of caution.”

“Ha-ha-ha! Not in my dictionary!”

“It should be!”

Unlike Maple, they had plenty of piercing attacks and the ability to take a hit or two—so these foes did not pose any real threat. Taking enemies out as they went, they pressed on—until they reached a large open room.

“The boss already?”

“Nah, can’t be. Too soon.”

“Exercise caution. Frederica, better lay those buffs on us again.”

“Coming right up...”

When they stepped inside, a crystal wall sprang up, sealing the exit.

And monsters started rising from the ground all over.

“Ugh, what a hassle.”

“What do we do, Pain?”

“I’ll handle it. Drag, buy me a little time.”

“On it! Ground Splitter!”

Drag split the ground, delaying the monsters’ advance, and Pain quickly applied a bunch more buffs to himself. When he was ready, he drew his sword.

“Range Expansion! Holy Condemnation!”

Pain’s skill turned his gleaming blade into a ray that split space itself, cleaving all monsters before him.

“Holy Breach!”

He lunged at the survivors, taking out three more with his next blow.

In two swings, he’d turned the tide.

And with Drag’s ground split immobilizing them, they could not dodge.

“Hmph!”

Finding himself surrounded, Pain parried with his shield, slicing through one after the other.

Each time he took a swing, a monster vanished.

But all their attacks bounced off his shield, got parried by his blade, or caught nothing but air.

Frederica just assumed Pain could handle it, and Drag and Dread were both working support. There were a *lot* of enemies, but that didn’t pose much challenge to their leader.

He neither took evasive action like Sally nor soaked the damage like Maple.

But his strength was much more stable than either. Nothing rattled him. When he swung his blade, nothing remained behind.

“Okay, all done.”

“Nice work! You barely broke a sweat.”

“Drag’s delay allowed me to thin their numbers at the start. Made things far easier.”

“I know you’ve got a shield, but you still fend off incoming blows pretty

easily.”

“Yeah, Drag, you oughtta take tips.”

“I’m pure offense. Parries ain’t my style.”

“Urgh, he’s just owning it...”

The four of them had polished off the monster house in a handful of seconds, then pressed on through the sixth floor.

They found several more monster houses on the way, but not even one managed to delay this party longer than a minute.

Like the floors before this one, their combat skills were put to good use, and they soon filled in the map.

And naturally, they collected the items, materials, and skills they found along the way.

At the back of the sixth layer, they found the Crystallization skill Maple was already using.

“Nah, doesn’t work with my stats.”

“Same. Ain’t ever gonna have a VIT over a hundred.”

“Ditto!”

“Fortunately, they’re scrolls. We can pass them along to players who need them.”

“Can’t imagine anyone who isn’t a Great Shielder would...”

Those players were the bulk of the game’s tanks and would definitely make good use of this skill.

All three of them immediately pictured Maple.

“Let’s assume Maple is no longer vulnerable to status effects, then...”

“Next time we have to fight her, we’ll need to plan around that possibility.”

“Definitely...but if that’s the worst she’s got, it ain’t a big deal.”

“True. Frederica made it sound like she’s got way weirder stuff.”

“But we will prevail,” Pain said. “Conquering this tower is one step toward that goal.”

The others nodded. They’d mapped the whole floor and knew exactly where the boss room was.

“Let’s take out this boss, then.”

“Yup. I’ve had enough monster houses.”

“Let’s go. Hopefully there’s room to swing an ax.”

“Bosses do demand proper support!”

They bulldozed a few monsters, making a beeline for the boss room.

As the doors opened, they saw a wizard in a big hat wielding a staff. He took one look at them and started summoning soldiers.

“All foes we fought on the way...what a headache.”

“What’s the plan? Focus fire on the boss himself?”

“Yeah, seems wise.”

“Got it!”

The basic monster-house strategy applied here, so Drag fired up his Ground Splitter, and Frederica started blasting magic.

But the boss summoned a slew of barriers in the area, blocking all damage.

“Ugh, it’s the same type as me!”

Seeing Frederica thwarted, Pain began to cut his way toward the boss.

But in response, the boss started summoning more soldiers to protect itself.

“More adds? Awfully fast...”

“Hey! If there are this many, I can’t keep you safe!”

“I’d better take a run at it. Pain, keep that side busy.”

“Got it!”

“Multi-Hasten! Multi-Strengthen! Fight Song! Incite!”

Frederica piled short-term buffs on Pain and Dread.

And not just four or five—between skills and magic, they had so many buffs that they blurred, their DPS skyrocketing, their weapons enveloped in red auras.

“Armor Piercer! Whirlwind Slicer!”

“Range Expansion! Holy Condemnation!”

A tremendous flurry of damage particles went up from both sides of the room.

Dread’s pierce buff and high-speed combo had him carving through foes, while Pain’s single swing took out a huge swath of adds. And Drag used a skill to send himself rocketing up the now-open center.

“Charge! Power Ax! See, I got this!”

Drag got behind the boss and swung his ax hard, sending it flying toward Pain and Dread.

Off-balance, the boss tried to counter, throwing out another mass of magic circles that fired crystal arrows.

““Superspeed!””

But both warriors lunged forward, ducking under the volley, up close and on the attack.

“Quintuple Slash!”

“Holy Condemnation!”

Their blades pierced its torso, and the HP bar dropped like a stone.

But still, it did not fall. Shock waves from beneath their feet sent both men flying back.

“Multi-Heal!”

Drag had borne the brunt of those arrows, and the shock wave had hit Pain and Dread hard—but Frederica had a restoration spell ready.

The boss slammed its staff on the ground, summoning three huge magic circles. From each of them emerged a dragon made of crystal—chased with even more soldiers.

“Ha! This guy’s going for broke!”

“Careful. We’ll have to beat them, too.”

“Frederica, fighting all of these is too much. Transfer my Armor Piercer to Pain and let’s finish this.”

“Hmm? Pain, you mind?”

“...No, let’s do it. I’ll finish this before you get hurt.”

“Cool. Everyone, up your attack.”

The boss was peppering them with crystal arrows. The dragons were firing laser beams and gouging swaths out of the ground with their claws. And they had to continue fending off the mob soldiers, as well—but soon, their setup was complete.

“Multi-Transfer!”

Frederica’s spell moved all buffs from Dread, Drag, and herself to Pain.

With all that stacked on him, Pain’s aura grew even stronger. He raised his sword— And the boss sent a volley of arrows at him. All three dragons fired their lasers, and a wave of soldiers charged his way.

“Holy Havoc!”

But Pain released a mighty swing, pushing them back with a powerful light, a shock wave tearing up the surface of the ground. Backed by all those buffs, the arrows, lasers, and minions alike turned to light, swallowed up in the havoc.

With all their power focused on this one swing, no add could possibly survive it.

“Got him!”

Pain closed in, slicing the light itself. The minions’ sacrifice had left the boss hanging on by a thread, but his sword fell like a hammer—and sparks sprayed from the wizard’s shoulder.

The boss let out a death cry—and collapsed, shattering into shards of light.

“Whew...nicely done.”

“Thanks, everyone.”

Pain sheathed his blade and dusted himself off. They collected the drops and divvied them up—and all that was left was the path to the seventh floor.

“That was some *good* damage, Pain.”

“Let’s hope we can handle the next like that.”

“We’re in the back half now. The bosses will be that much harder.”

“But not for us!”

“True. Not with your buffs and defense.”

“Only you actually need defending, Drag.”

“Everyone’s still raring to go? Then let’s move.”

“Indeed. We’re all still at full strength, so no reason to stop now.”

“Let’s be the first to clear this thing!”

“Yeah! Nothing’s gonna stop us!”

After overpowering the latest boss they encountered, the party of four headed to the next floor.

Their goal—to score the fastest clear. Each had different reasons for tackling this with a small party, but ultimately, they were just super competitive.



CHAPTER 6

Defense Build and Tower's Seventh Floor

"Welp."

"Another wild one..."

On the seventh floor, Maple and Sally were greeted by a blizzard, near whiteout conditions, snow piled to their knees—and a sheer cliff face one step ahead. Above them, the snowstorm raged as far as the eye could see. It seemed like they had to get down the cliff somehow, but the blizzard made it hard to see where or how.

This definitely wasn't a view you expected inside a tower, and it left them agape.

The snow was coming down so hard, some of their equipment was freezing and giving off a faint light.

"What do we do, Sally? I don't see any monsters, at least."

"We're up this cliff, so...we head down?"

With so little visibility, they had to pick their way along.

They soon found a set of platforms leading down the cliff—and no way to progress in any other direction.

"Guess we've just gotta go down. But..."

"Urgh, this wind is nuts!"

It was hard to see through the snow, their feet buried in drifts and their bodies buffeted by high winds—navigating these little footholds was gonna be rough. Maple probably would have struggled with it even in the absence of stormy weather.

"But we've gotta go down. Ideas?"

"If I summon Syrup, it should be a lot easier."

Maple tried to do that, but it wouldn't respond.

"Huh? Uh...guess not. Wonder why?"

Sally checked her status menu.

It had a message saying that equipment skills and abilities were sealed here. Maple had all her main skills on equipment slots—and they were greyed out.

"It doesn't override Indestructible or stat boosts, but Mirage and Oceanic are gone. You in the same boat, Maple?"

"Ugh...I'm doomed...but I guess that just means this floor isn't messing around!"

"That's the spirit."

The limitations might be pretty strict, but it took more than that to get Maple down. She wouldn't start to wilt unless things actually managed to hurt her.

"Should we just head down normally, then?"

Sally looked at Maple, raising an eyebrow.

"Eh-heh-heh. I think there's a shortcut."

"Mm-hmm. That's what I thought you'd say."

They moved to the edge of the cliff and peered over.

Their goal might not be in sight, but if Maple felt like jumping—she could.

Her "shortcut" was in fact a defense-reliant free fall.

"Martyr's Devotion isn't sealed, so I can come with. And the conventional route *would* be real rough on you."

"Then let's get ready! Make sure you tie yourself tight! Don't want you getting blown yonder."

"Yeah, just to be safe, I'd better have an item ready."

Leaving one hand free for Web Spinner, in her other she held an item they'd found on the fifth stratum—one that generated a mass of water. Sally put her back to Maple's and tied a rope around them.

"Weird how we just automatically include cliff diving on our list of options

now. Definitely your fault, Maple.”

“Ah-ha-ha... Well, if it was sunny out, I’d be up for at least trying the regular path.”

“Ready?”

“Yep! On three—”

They took a deep breath, then swung their arms, using that momentum to launch themselves out into the open air.

They tore through the blizzard, feet straight down, plunging to the unseen ground below.

“Urgh...the wind is so loud!”

“You...can say that again!”

As they fell, the blizzard subsided. Through the flurry, they could just make out the ground.

It was covered in a field of razor-sharp ice spikes—which were *clearly* going to do piercing damage.

“Urgh! Th-this is really bad!”

“They knew we’d jump and laid a trap?!”

Sally immediately threw out the item in her hand. Easily found in rain-soaked areas of the fifth stratum, this generated a huge blob of water floating right beneath their feet.

“Water Wall! Subzero Domain!”

She used a skill to increase the water volume and then another to instantly freeze it all.

Even frozen, it maintained its buoyancy. They smashed into it with a deafening crack, and it shattered—but it did slow them down.

“It can’t quite stop us, but...”

Sally generated a second ball of water above their heads, froze it, and then webbed it, using it as an anchor to swing them back toward the cliff face.

There were ice spikes there, too, but it was better than the ground below.

“Maple, shield!”

“Huh? Oh, right!”

Maple braced her shield just before they slammed into the cliff. It didn’t quite manage to cover all the ice, and some of the spikes scraped her sides. Sparks flew.

“Ughhh...!”

“Heal! Uh, let’s land on a platform here.”

Sally topped up Maple’s HP, and they sat down on an icy ledge. Maple rubbed her wounds and gave the spikes a haunted look.

“I guess we shouldn’t cheat...”

“Yeah...no more blind jumps.”

“At least it wasn’t monsters.”

“True. Don’t wanna ruin our no-damage run here.”

Despite everything, they’d still skipped the bulk of the cliff descent.

“Whew...my heart finally stopped racing.”

“Same. Good thing I had an escape plan ready.”

Once they’d calmed themselves down, they undid the rope and began carefully jumping down the remaining platforms.

There wasn’t much left to that intended path, and they took their time with it.

They’d skipped all the most dangerous sections of it, so it really was just a matter of well-aimed jumps.

When they reached the bottom, they found a forest of icy blades looming ahead.

“...Do we go that way?”

The snowstorm had died down enough for Sally to spot a narrow path leading out through the spikes.

“At least they don’t stab you if you’re just walking between them.”

They started down the icy path.

There were no signs of any monsters. This floor’s threats were all terrain.

“I bet that means these spikes *are* armor piercing,” Sally said, knocking the icy side. “If we’d fallen on them, they would’ve killed us instantly.”

“Urgh, I’m so glad I didn’t slip while jumping down...”

Maple didn’t often encounter instakill damage, so this made her shudder.

Eventually, the path opened up to a circular arena, buried in snow.

“The boss?”

“Nothing here now... Oh, is that it?”

They could hear something smashing through the spikes—and then something big, round, and spiky came tumbling out.

It unrolled itself before them.

The boss looked a lot like a hedgehog—albeit one made of snow, sporting spines of ice.

“So cute! Um...cute, but...!”

“Don’t want it rolling into us.”

Those spines looked like trouble, and it had come rolling in at speeds that belied its appearance.

The whole design screamed piercing damage, so they really couldn’t afford to soak a charge.

The hedgehog spotted the girls and rolled itself up into a giant snowball—covered in icy spikes. It started rolling their way.

“Maple, brace yourself!”

“Okay! Pierce Guard!”

Sally hid behind her, and Maple used her shield to deflect the charge—and the sheer speed of it sent her flying.

“Ugh...it’s *so* fast!”

She got up, dusting herself off. No damage, but if they were getting knocked around like this, it would be hard to fight back.

“We’ve gotta stop it somehow.”

“H-how?”

“...Uh...Maple, look over there.”

Sally was pointing at the boss’s back. Two of the spines had snapped off at the base.

If those were gone, then Maple didn’t have to worry about piercing damage anymore.

“Worth a shot. If you attack those and guard when it charges, and the spines keep breaking, that’s likely the intended strategy.”

“Okay! I’ll give it a shot. Full Deploy!”

Maple spouted guns and started shooting at the boss as it got ready to roll back at them.

Her bullets hit—and did no damage. But they *did* break several ice spines.

“Incoming!”

“Cover Move!”

Maple fired till the last second. Sally jumped safely out of the path, and Maple used a skill to follow her.

“Eh-heh-heh, been a while since we used that trick.”

“But if you take a hit now, it’ll do double damage.”

“Ah! I forgot. We’d better be careful.”

“...Doesn’t seem to be any point attacking while it rolls.”

“True! Those hits didn’t break any spines.”

“Let’s work out when exactly we can hurt it. It seems to have several phases.”

“Okay! As long as we can dodge it, it’s not so scary.”

“At this speed, we should manage it. Letting you handle attacks for now.”

“Cool! But you’re in charge of dodging.”

Maple opened fire again, and for a while, they fled the boss’s charges with Cover Move.

It was invincible while rolling, but it wasn’t that hard for them to target it during the downtime between charges.

They rinsed and repeated this until all the spines were broken.

“Great! Now what?”

With the threat of piercing damage eliminated, Maple had nothing to fear.

They braced themselves for the next charge—but the hedgehog slipped on the snow, landed on its back, and didn’t get up again. It was just thrashing its stubby little legs.

“Now’s our chance!”

“Argh, it’s too far away!”

“Sally, grab hold!”

“Huh? Oh, sure!”

Maple pointed her artillery down and used the explosion to rocket them at the boss.

She more or less crash-landed right on its exposed belly and grinned triumphantly.

“Fire Ball! Triple Slash! Cool, I’m doing damage!”

“Uh...what attack skills do I have? Oh! Pandemonium!”

Ogres appeared on either side of the writhing hedgehog and began pounding it with their clubs, doing...*some* damage.

“Th-the visual is, uh...”

“They aren’t doing that much damage, though... Yikes!”

“Maybe it resists? Back off for now!”

The boss finally righted itself, knocking Maple off. Sally caught her, and they backed away. This boss seemed to resist everything *except* fire damage, so they hadn't really hurt it much.

"Mm... Oh, you don't need to attack anymore, ogres!"

The boss had burrowed itself into the snow, and Maple's ogres were still trying to get at it—but accomplishing nothing.

"Argh, it's running away!"

"No, this is probably..."

As she spoke, the hedgehog resurfaced—
—with a whole new set of spikes.

The ogres started pounding away again, but that alone didn't break all the spikes...and the boss hit them with its roll, vaporizing them instantly.

"Augh!"

"It might be hitting harder now! Maple, make sure you dodge in time."

"R-right...I really don't wanna soak that."

With the bulk of Maple's high-damage skills sealed and their inherent numbers disadvantage, this was shaping up to be a long battle.

Maintaining focus would be critical.

They would need to dodge attacks, lay into it, back off—gradually chipping away at its HP.

As long as they were careful, it wasn't gonna hurt them.

"Dodge...and strike!"

"Great! Halfway mark!"

The HP bar had changed color, but this milestone just renewed their concentration.

If they let it damage them now, it would all be for nothing. As they watched, the hedgehog burrowed into the snow again, vanishing from view.

"Again?!"

“Maple! It might have a new pattern! Back off and watch closely!”

“Got it!”

Sally threw out an Ice Pillar and webbed them up off the ground.

An instant later, ice spikes started shooting out of the ground at random, trying to run them through.

“Th-that was close...”

“Gotta watch the ground when it’s burrowing. See? You can tell the boss is under there.”

“Oh, I see, I see.”

After a minute, the spike attacks died down, and the boss resurfaced.

“It’s back. Hop down.”

“Got it!”

They waited for it to charge and tried to dodge to one side, like always.

But once again, it changed up its pattern—it *curved* to follow them.

“Eek?! Cover! Pierce Guard!”

Maple got her skills up quickly, jumped in front of Sally, and held out her shield just as the ice spines slammed into her.

There was a crack as the spines snapped, but the hedgehog kept rolling right over them, not even slowing down.

“That was so close... It scraped my head...”

Maple rubbed her head, making sure it hadn’t done damage, and glared balefully after it.

“Good reflexes, Maple. Sorry, I’ll get us out next time.”

“Yes, please.”

The boss came charging in again, and again they dodged. Again, it curved to chase them.

“Leap! Hokay.”

Sally used a skill to jump farther, yanking Maple out of harm's way with her webs.

The boss turned only the one time; once they managed to dodge, it just rolled straight away.

"If you use Cover Move, it'll be disastrous if it does hit you."

The side effect of that skill was double damage—usually meaningless but, against foes that ignored defense, impossible to overlook. Once Pierce Guard wore off, Maple's low HP would leave her vulnerable to surprise deaths.

"If we lower the HP even more, will it turn twice?"

"Maybe. Let's try and cut it down before the next phase shift."

Since her skills could bring them up and over threats, the ground spikes weren't that big a threat; they were repeating the pattern, piling on the damage.

Both used items Iz had made to apply the fire element to their attacks and were now doing enough damage that it was like their skills weren't sealed.

With all spines gone, the boss flopped onto its back again.

"Jump on!"

"Okay, attack time!"

Their weapons sprouted flames, and they started pounding the soft underbelly. The total HP dropped below 20 percent.

But just as it seemed like they had it, the boss burrowed once more.

"Right, let's get outta Dodge!"

"Yeah. I bet it'll change things again. Watch out."

They scrambled back up the pillar of ice, watching it carefully.

Like before, ice spikes jutted out of the ground at random; then the hedgehog popped out, rolled itself up, and started rocketing around—but this time it was *shooting* the spikes on its back.

"Uh-oh!"

“Cover!”

A massive ice spike shattered against Maple’s shield. One after another—it was all she could do to block them.

“Urgh, these are hitting so hard!”

“Keep your eyes in front! You don’t want them scraping you!”

Their position precarious, they had to grit their teeth and endure the barrage. Finally, the boss shot its last spike and tried to bury itself again.

But they weren’t about to let it.

“We’ve got plenty of ranged attacks!”

“Don’t let that thing burrow!”

The ground spikes showed no signs of abating, so Sally kept them webbed above the field, while Maple deployed her artillery, raining bullets and lasers down. Sally backed this up with magic and attack items, supporting Maple and adding to the DPS.

Since they were exploiting its elemental weakness, the remaining HP was visibly dropping. Just as it had almost vanished belowground—the last dot vanished.

“We did it!”

“Whew. Good guard work there—it really saved our bacon.”

“Your Ice Pillar did *that*. Without it, we’d never have made it past the ground spikes.”

“Heh-heh, division of labor. You made fighting it easy and helped us skip the bulk of the dungeon leading in.”

“Oh, right, that was this floor.”

“Next time, let’s look before we leap.”

“Ah-ha-ha...lesson learned.”

Three floors remained in the seventh event, so they called it a day.

They’d used a lot of items, and Maple’s skills were running low. Machine God

was out of ammo. Taking some time off would let them come back at full strength and also give them a chance to ask the other guild members how much progress they'd made. To that end, they swung by the Guild Home.



When they got back to the fifth-stratum Guild Home, they found the others resting after their own tower run. Maple ran over, all excited.

"Oh, you just wrapped up?"

"Yes! We're running low on skills, so we called it a day."

"How far did you two get?"

"We just finished the seventh floor!"

Iz filled two more cups, and they all sat down.

The others had just cleared the ninth floor.

"Wow! That's amazing."

"Yeah, we've got some catching up to do."

"We'll avoid spoilers—don't wanna ruin your fun. But the tenth-floor boss is something else."

"We just came back from a wipe. I'm sure you'll get there easily enough, but be careful. It hits hard and quick."

Maple and Sally looked surprised. It was hard for them to imagine anything strong enough that their friends would struggle.

"Maple, Sally! Good luck."

"We're gonna beat it next time!"

"Yeah, we were still feeling it out, so I didn't use any grimoires. It didn't have *that* many attack types. I'm sure you can handle it."

The others had plenty of options and ideas they hadn't tried out, but it was clear this foe was still formidable.

"...Th-this boss sounds tough. I'm getting nervous!"

"Maple, too soon. We've got two more floors to get through first."

“True! Well, let’s just be ready for anything.”

“If you’re low on any items, hit me up. I’ve also got some neat stuff I made from tower drops, so feel free to help yourselves to those.”

“Oooh, thanks, Iz!”

“Mm-hmm, sounds good. With just the two of us, we’ve burned through items to boost our DPS.”

Maple’s big moves generally did fixed damage, which meant she could lay down the hurt without any STR, but that also meant it was quite hard for her to boost that.

As the bosses got stronger, they were increasingly reliant on Sally’s damage output.

“While our side has three on offense, we sure are learning how great it is to have a healer around...”

“We normally just use Maple.”

“But with Mai and Yui, most bosses have been a cakewalk.”

“Glad we can help!”

“We’re getting good at landing hits!”

The twins looked pleased by their performance. Seeing this, Maple was glad she’d asked them to join the guild.

From there, the conversation moved on to the bosses they’d struggled with.

“That book boss was brutal.”

“Yeah, it took my katana skills and Chrome’s self-healing...”

“Mai and Yui’s attack dropped real hard.”

All members of this guild had powerful skills, and if those got stolen, their usual approach crumbled.

“Ew, yeah, that was bad. It took almost *all* my skills.”

“But they just bounced off her, so we ended up tricking it into using Martyr’s Devotion, so *everything* I hit did damage. Still barely beat it.”

“So you are as crazy as ever?” Kanade asked.

Maple started waving both arms around. “I mean, Sally dodged right through a Machine God barrage while I was getting chewed up by Predators and beat the thing! She was incredible!”

“Been a while since I had to actually dodge my way through a boss fight, sans her angel aura. It was kinda fun.”

“You can even dodge through Machine God...”

“Nobody else can do that.”

The more they talked, the clearer it became that the two of them had not beat many floors in anything resembling a conventional approach. But the way the other six were brute-forcing the bosses was not exactly typical, either.

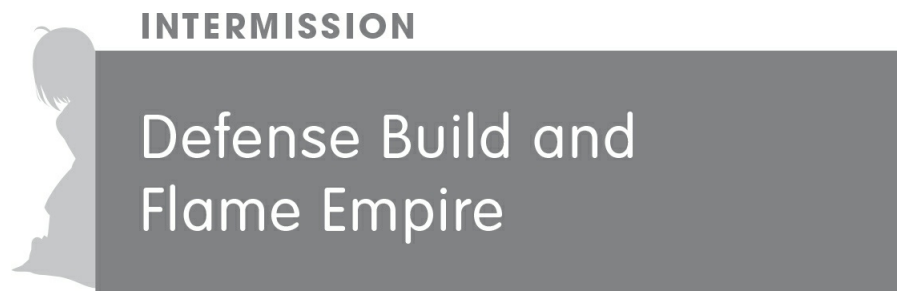
“Once this event is over, I wanna go exploring with the whole guild.”

“That sounds good. First we gotta clear this tenth floor.”

“We’ll figure out a strat to get ourselves through. Whoever wraps up first, wait outside the tower.”

“We’ll be there! Doing our best to catch up!”

Everyone was on board with getting the whole gang together, and the conversation drifted back to other stories about the current event.



Flame Empire's party of four was in the blizzard on the seventh floor, peering over the cliff.

The snowstorm was raging too hard to see the bottom.

"This floor's all snow and ice," Shin said. "Bet you'll do well, Mii."

He drew his sword, ready to do his bit as the team's secondary damage dealer.

"We'll have to reach the bottom...and those footholds look precarious."

"I'll take the lead. There might be traps."

"Yes, you do that. Misery, keep him alive."

"But of course."

The only way down was a series of tiny platforms jutting out of the cliff face.

"Whew...one slip and you're done for."

"Hang on...I bet there's something on that one."

In the lead, Marx was pointing at a platform that was *slightly* wider than the others. And to progress, they'd have to cross it.

"With my skills sealed...I can't actually be sure, though."

He could normally use an equipment skill to locate traps, but this floor was locking all of those.

Marx suspected a trap purely on instinct. But it was enough to stop the party dead.

"If you think it's sus, it's sus."

"I agree."

"What now? It doesn't look like we can just jump over it."

“Shin, try attacking.”

“Mm, got it. Splinter Sword.”

Shin’s blade split into several smaller swords, floating in the air around them. They shot forward, stabbing into the platform and the walls around it.

The platform lit up—and a giant ice spike shot out.

A moment later, it vanished, and Marx pointed forward—to move before it reset.

They did, following his lead. He spotted every trap with uncanny accuracy. Eventually they found a cave and took a rest.

“Wow...Marx, how are you spotting this?”

“And without your skill.”

“J-just...guessing?”

He didn’t seem to fully understand himself, but the results spoke for themselves. Even without the skill that revealed all traps, his experience and instincts compensated.

“It’s keeping us alive. Were it not for Marx, we would long since have been flung to the bottom.”

“I’ve got you covered on the way. But the boss fight...”

“Is all mine. No ice boss can stop *me*.”

“Mm. Just gotta get you there.”

When they’d rested up, they headed deeper into the cave. The passage was a gradual downward slope, and the ceiling was covered in icicles. The walls and floor were frozen solid. It was barely wide enough to walk two abreast, and they moved very carefully.

“So slippery... Really hard to walk here.”

“Eyes up—something’s coming!” Marx cried.

A moment later, a colony of white bats flew from the back of the cave.

“That’s it? Ha!”

Before the bats could unleash their icy breath attack, Shin's flying swords ran them through.

In a narrow cave, it was tough to dodge the whole cloud, but that was equally true for his signature move. The splintered blades were unstoppable and took out all the bats before any reached the party.

"Cool. Having one of them good days."

"We never even got a chance to act."

"True."

"You're holding back until the boss fight, right? Lemme handle the mobs on the way."

Several more colonies attacked, but Shin shot 'em all down.

The next challenge was a vertical shaft, forcing them to lower themselves down on ropes.

After that was an open room, with an icy floor studded with pits.

"Pretty big."

"Watch out for those pits. Might be something in them."

"Turns out you're right!"

Little hedgehogs popped out of the holes, screeching—and sealing the way in and out.

"Icicles falling from above!"

"And from below?!"

"Pyre!" Mii roared.

Flames belched forth, bathing the icicles, the hedgehogs, and the ice over the doors. They filled the entire room—but the icicles were coded differently and were impervious.

"Ack...!"

"God's Breath! Healing Light!"

Misery activated a skill that reduced damage and healed over time, then a

standard HP recovery skill.

The damage the icicles had done was quickly healed.

The flames died down. When the rain of ice and floor spikes stopped, they were all still standing.

“Sweet! You bailed us out there, Misery.”

“Thanks...”

“We’re not safe yet! We need to deal with the cause!”

“Here they come again. Don’t let them burrow!”

Mii and Shin worked together, playing Whac-A-Hedgehog. When the last of them was slain, there was a shattering noise—and the ice over the doors crumbled away.

“Whew...at least they had no health.”

“That got us pretty good, but with Misery on board, we can pull through.”

“I am just not good at ambushes... Thanks.”

“Thank you. But with my equipment skills sealed, the amount I can heal is much smaller. You’ll need to fight with caution.”

“It’s still more than enough! But fair point. We’ll be careful.”

They headed deeper into the cave, and it brought them back to the cliff face—over halfway down.

The snow had eased up, and they could finally make out the ground below.

“Whoa, look at all those spikes.”

“Indeed. If we can see the ground, we don’t have much more to go.”

“And the boss might be right behind. Stay combat ready.”

With the end of the cliff in sight, their thoughts turned to the fight ahead.

There were many traps and frequent attacks by swarms of weak monsters, but neither of those posed a threat to this party. Marx and Shin got them to the base without major incident.

“We’ve come pretty far.”

“Yeah, but that cave in the middle makes it tough to gauge the distance.”

“A very monster-light floor. Which way next?”

“Maybe there...?”

Marx pointed at a gap in the ice spikes. If they went single file, they should fit through.

“Hmm, not seeing any traps.”

“Then let’s move.”

Mii flexed both hands, ready to activate Flame Empress the moment they spotted a boss.

Once they were through the icicle forest, a snowy field opened up before them. They braced for combat, and a giant hedgehog emerged, its back covered in icy spines.

“There’s the boss, Mii!”

“Like a big version of those mobs!”

“Flame Empress!”

The instant it faced them, Mii held up her palms, spawning balls of fire. They blew back the driving snow, illuminating the snowy plain.

“I know you’re all ready! Let’s do this!”

And at her cry, the fight ignited.



*

The hedgehog rolled up into a snowball, the surface covered in icy spikes. It shot toward them at extraordinary speeds.

Marx quickly laid down some ranged traps, trying to stop the charge, but it tore right through the vines and rock walls, not even slowing down.

“Pyre!”

Flames erupted from Mii’s body, shooting forward. Far too hot for a body made of ice and snow to withstand.

But to her surprise, the boss just rolled right through the inferno, gouging Mii’s shoulder. It took a huge chunk of her health with it, but Misery instantly healed that up.

“You okay?”

“...I’m fine.”

Watching the boss roll away, Mii chugged an MP potion, topping up her mana pool.

“Didn’t hurt it at all, huh?”

“No, you did *something*.”

When the snow cloud faded, it was clear the bulk of the boss’s spines was gone.

Nothing could soak Mii’s flames head-on. A single strike had devastated its weaponry.

“Let’s try and knock off the rest. Misery, MP refills are on you.”

“Understood.”

“Flare Impetus!”

Fire burst from Mii’s feet, propelling her forward. She closed in before the boss could start rolling and threw herself into combat at a range far closer than any other mage.

With a fireball wreathing each hand, she melted all the spines off the boss,

then flew up to the air above, hurtling lances of flame down upon it.

This boss took no damage while it was rolling, but between charges, it was a different story. She was carving huge chunks out of its health bar.

“Mii, another charge coming!”

“I see it!”

But without any spines left, attempting to roll just made it slip—and land on its back. Wide open.

“MP Transfer!”

“Flamation!”

Misery passed Mii some MP, and she used it to fuel a big move. A red magic circle deployed around Mii, coating the ground in flames.

For any players in range, it upped their raw damage output and applied the fire element to their attacks. This gave the whole party a huge boost.

“Hmph!”

Mii lit the boss up with her dual fireballs and generated spheres of flame in the air, hurling them at it. Swords on fire flew in from both sides, and fiery brambles entangled the boss from below.

“Blue Fire!”

For her finisher, Mii slammed her palm into the boss with an eruption of bright blue flames—sacrificing her own health to diminish the boss’s.

“Turn to ash!”

The blue flames burst through its back, spreading out along the ground—and the boss’s HP hit 0.

The boss shattered, turning to light, and the residual flames subsided.

“Damn,” Shin said. “Talk about firepower...”

“Yup.”

“All I could do was keep you max HP.”

“Thanks for that, Misery. Without you, I’d never have pulled it off.”

Misery's skills could refill Mii's HP and MP on the fly, giving her the freedom to bust out all her big moves in rapid succession.

Usually, she'd have drained those pools long before.

"That was definitely not a foe we were meant to end in one go."

"Mii was clearly having too much fun... Even more all-out than usual."

"W-was I?" Mii blinked, then started reflecting on the last few minutes.

"Maybe I'd better boost my own attack...," Shin muttered.

"That boss was a good match for you."

"Yeah. Who's up for more?"

"I am. You did all the work this time, after all."

"I'm good to go..."

"As am I."

"Then let's hit the eighth floor."

They still had more than enough fight left in them. Mii emptied another MP potion, her thoughts turning to Maple.

Wonder if she's making good progress...?

One big reason her team was only four strong was that she'd heard Maple and Sally were running the tower together. Thinking back on the bosses so far, she was pretty sure those two could handle them.

"What's up, Mii? We going or not?"

"Gasp...! Yes, my apologies. I'm on my way!"

The thought had stopped her in her tracks, but she set out once again—and the Flame Empire quartet headed to the floor above.

Mii quietly resolved to go hang with Maple once they cleared the tower.

"What does the eighth floor have for us...?"

"Looks like...a jungle."

Big trees, brush, vines—could work for Mii, could work against her.

“We’ll have to see if these trees are flammable.”

“If they are, we’ll have you go to town again!”

“.....Let’s not expect a repeat of the last floor yet.”

Perhaps she’d gotten a bit too excited about fighting an ice boss. Mii was a bit ashamed of herself.



Defense Build and Tower's Eighth Floor

The next day, they prepped as planned and were ready to venture higher in.

"The eighth floor awaits!"

"I wonder what it's like."

"We didn't ask the others, so we'll have to find out."

Together, they stepped forward, and the magic circle swept them up to the new floor.

When the light faded, they found themselves in a jungle.

Like the jungle event before, there were no clear paths through it, just trees in all directions. The underbrush got *very* dense in places, and there were vines dangling among the massive trunks. Looking up, they saw colorful fruit. No matter where they looked, there was zero indication of which way to go.

"Um. So...what do we do?"

"I mean, it put us facing this way, so...I guess we go forward?"

Neither sounded confident, but standing still would get them nowhere. They took a step forward— "Eek?!"

"Maple?!"

Something had shoved her from behind, and she fell over on her face.

Sally snapped around, drawing her daggers, squinting at the brush—but saw no signs of any assailant or traps.

"M-Martyr's Devotion!"

Maple deployed a protective field, keeping Sally safe.

For a moment, they stood back-to-back, watching their surroundings. No more attacks came. Sally put her daggers away, sighing.

"You okay, Maple?"

“Mm, glad they didn’t hit *you*.”

“I didn’t detect *anything*.”

“Was it a trap, or...?”

“Good question. Not enough info to work with. Can we keep Martyr’s Devotion going the whole time we’re here?”

“Totally. I’ll keep you safe!”

With that skill active, no ordinary attack could hurt Sally.

She always dodged everything, so it was easy to forget, but Sally’s HP was *very* low. If she ever did get hit, it would likely kill her.

“But I don’t like getting the short end of the stick. Best we figure out what’s going on here.”

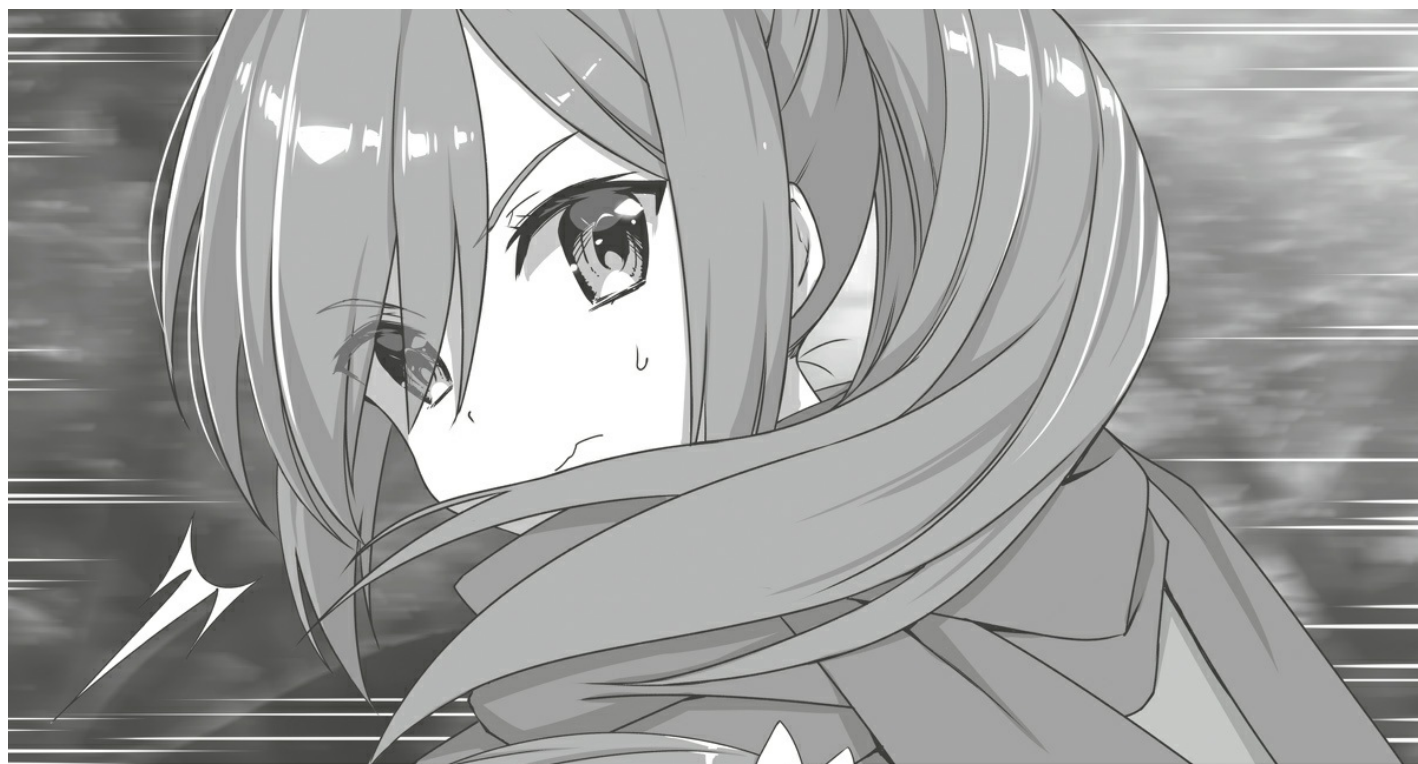
“I’ll keep my eyes peeled!”

Maple deployed her artillery, and they moved on, ready to fight at any time.

As they did, monkeys threw exploding nuts at them, roots popped out of the ground at their feet—and Martyr’s Devotion rendered the attacks moot.

“If there weren’t any monsters, we could relax and explore.”

“True. But we still don’t know what knocked you down.”



Sally was being much more cautious than usual—almost anxious. And the monsters were attacking from a distance and hiding in the shadows—she couldn't venture out to fight back.

"They're all running away!"

"Yeah...and not giving us any XP. Running after them doesn't seem worth it."

They hadn't found the boss yet, so they didn't want to waste any skills. They ignored the monsters entirely, focusing on their search.

Eventually, they found a stone slab half buried in the vegetation.

"Oh! Sally! Look there."

"No magic circle. Doesn't look like the boss room... Let's take a closer look."

They moved in and found writing on it.

"The path will be revealed to whomsoever defeats the crafty jungle ruler."

"The boss, then?"

"Probably."

"Then we'll have to— Whoa!"

Maple suddenly toppled forward and banged her head on the slab.

Something had hit her from behind.

Sally immediately whirled round. This time she spotted a giant chameleon on a tree, rolling its tongue back up. It quickly turned invisible.

"There it is..."

"Urgh, what? What was it?"

"A chameleon. Probably behind both attacks. And I bet we're *already* in the boss room. Or else this boss just free-rooms the entire field."

"Then we'll have to chase after it!"

"Prolly, buuuut...it's invisible. That makes it tricky. This was just its way of saying hi."

With trees this dense, Maple's ranged attacks wouldn't be that effective.

Since the chameleon was moving around silently, Sally couldn't predict its attacks; her usual speedy reconnaissance was off the table.

"Guess we'd better give chase."

"We'll just have to try stuff out...zzz."

Mid-enthuse, Maple's eyes drooped, and she slumped against the slab—sound asleep.

"...Maple? Ack! Sleep!"

This was a status effect that left you immobile for twenty seconds but would wear off if you took damage.

The invisible attack must have been the cause.

And as if they were waiting for that, the enemies above dropped a ton of exploding nuts on them.

"*Crafty* is one word for it. Good thing we had Martyr's Devotion up."

But since Maple didn't take damage from this, it didn't wake her up, either.

"Guess I'll just wait..."

Sally watched Maple slumber blissfully, wondering how they could catch this chameleon.

"Mm...unh, huh?"

Exactly twenty seconds later, Maple sat up, looking confused.

"Morning. No more attacks while you slept it off."

"Oh...well, at least Martyr's Devotion's still active. Whew!"

"Yeah, but...if its attacks apply sleep on a delay like that, it's gonna take a while to catch our invisible friend."

"Wanna bust out some of Iz's items?"

The pile Iz had given them yesterday included some items that would temporarily null sleep. But the effect didn't last long, and they hadn't been given many.

Without knowing when the chameleon would attack, it was better not to

waste them.

“First, we’ll need to be up close. We don’t even know how much HP it has.”

“True! Welp, let’s get look— Augh!”

For the third time, something hit Maple in the back. But instead of knocking her forward, this time it dragged her higher.

“Yiiiikes!”

“Yeah, that’s not good! Superspeed!”

Maple was already out of range of Web Spinner, so Sally had to use her speed boost to catch up. Tree roots were right on her heels, and exploding nuts went off all around her.

“Soooo close! I was only *just* in range!”

She’d had to do a dive roll to get inside Martyr’s Devotion but was relieved to be alive.

“Ugh, that was a shocker...”

The thing pulling Maple had let go and dropped her, and she came crashing to the ground.

Sally caught up, and this time she webbed herself to Maple so they’d be forced to stay together.

“Okay, lifeline’s good. Ugh, that nearly gave me a heart attack.”

“Yeah...this thing is all about surprises.”

“But it always moves around behind us, so we might be able to aim for that.”

It had still hit them only three times. And attacking them from the rear gave it the advantage, so it was hard to say for sure.

“The next time it attacks, I’ll try shooting back. I might hit!”

“Yeah, that would certainly make this easy.”

Since neither of them could spot it coming, they were forced to wait for it to make the next move.

They stood there awhile.

“...Nothing’s happening.”

“No use stressing out about it. Not like we can see anything.”

“Good po— Aughhh! C-Commence Assault!”

No sooner had the words left their mouths than Maple fired her guns dead ahead.

They made short work of the shrubbery, but no damage sparks went up.

At best, some colorful fruit fell from the trees.

“Ughhh...my face is all sticky...”

Maple was rubbing her face with both hands. Sally took out a towel and handed it to her.

“It’ll probably come off in time, but it looks pretty gross.”

“Ugh, thanks.”

“You didn’t manage to hit like you were hoping, but you knocked something down. We’d better check it out.”

“Maybe it’ll be materials or an item! Oh, I’d better change up my gear. Better to have Helping Hands hold more shields.”

“Yeah, good idea. Don’t know where the attack is going to come from.”

Sally was finally getting used to those disembodied hands. She still flinched when they came out, but she was soon herself again. Maple’s face was clean, and once she had her extra shields, they moved cautiously over to the fallen fruit.

“Materials?”

“No, looks like eighth-floor-exclusive items. Three types.”

One made invisible monsters visible but also made visible monsters invisible, another provided temporary status-effect immunity, and the last one told you where the chameleon currently was for ten seconds.

These effects could be active at the same time, so you only had to watch out for the duration and total quantity. The invisibility toggle’s effect could be

turned off by eating for a second while it was active, so carefully changing that up would be key to handling its attacks.

“Wow, these oughtta help a lot.”

“Yeah. I wanna make sure we have enough of ’em. Let’s do the rounds.”

“Mm, on the hunt for more!”

The boss hit them a few more times, but they knew they’d get it back eventually. For now, they focused on gathering fruit. Especially the one that told them where the chameleon was. That would really help them fight back.

“Ready to turn the tables?”

“Yeah. Let’s!”

Maple bit into a fruit—and instantly knew where the chameleon was.

She put her arm around Sally and used Machine God’s explosions to propel them through the trees.

They closed in fast, Sally using her webs to adjust their trajectory.

No point in slowly cornering it—they just blasted straight at the thing.

“Sally, go right!”

“Got it!”

After some very forced cornering, Maple blasted off again.

“It’s close!”

“Okay!”

Sally bit into the invisibility fruit, released the webs, and jumped to the trees.

The chameleon shot out its tongue, but Sally easily dodged.

“No prob if I can see you!”

She used Leap to close in and cut a deep gash from its head to its tail, falling back to Maple below.

The chameleon was briefly visible, thrashing about, then started hopping away through the trees.

“Sally, its HP was down to half!”

“I see! Not really a foe that can take us head-on.”

“Yeah, we do this again, it might be over.”

“Then we just gotta find it!”

But naturally, it wasn't that easy. Before their very eyes, it spawned several clones, which scurried away into the underbrush.

This was clearly a phase shift, and they were soon out of sight.

“Do we have to beat *all* of those?”

“Could be one of them's real.”

“Ugh, how do we know which?”

“If we're lucky, it'll have an HP bar. But I bet it won't be that easy.”

Figuring the worst was still ahead, they settled on a plan.

“Gotta start thinning the numbers.”

“Sure! Worth a try.”

They both ate an invisibility toggle so they could see it. Maple found the nearest one and shot a barrage its way.

But it quickly hid behind a tree.

“Hngg, no good.”

“They sure hide fast. Looks like ranged attacks aren't gonna work.”

As soon as Maple stopped shooting, several popped out, attacking from afar.

“Yuck, they're spitting poison!”

“Looks like it won't work as long as I'm in your cover...but it definitely curtails my actions. It's sticking around, too.”

“Is our first plan the only option?”

“That'll be rough. It's gonna take ages to find the real one.”

“Yeah. We need an area— Oh!”

“What?”

“What about Paralyze Shout?”

This was one of Maple’s skills and could apply a paralysis effect over quite a large area.

“It might not resist... Certainly worth a try!”

“Then let’s try and snare as many as we can. Sally, grab on!”

As soon as Sally was secure in Maple’s arms, they blasted off again. She found a spot with three chameleons in it and activated her skill.

“Paralyze Shout!”

The visual was like an electric spark—and two of the three chameleons fell to the ground.

Taking advantage of that, they fired spells and bullets, finishing them both off.

But rather than burst into light—they simply faded away.

“I bet that means there’s a real one out there.”

“Mm, but they don’t *always* get paralyzed.”

“Two outta three is plenty. This should make it a lot easier.”

“Eh-heh-heh! Happy to help.”

“You always do.”

Eliminating two chameleons didn’t seem to change much. Sally was probably right—they’d have to find and kill the real one.

“Okay! Next... Yikes?!”

“Maple?!”

Just as Maple made her next move, something invisible smacked her in the face and sent her flying.

Since they were webbed together, Sally was dragged after her. They’d each eaten a fruit that allowed them to see invisible monsters, but that also meant they couldn’t see attacks that were usually visible.

“Ugh...argh, that really startled me.”

“I’m so done with this floor.”

They just couldn’t get used to unseen attacks.

Especially Sally, who didn’t usually soak attacks at all.

But their goal was clear—they simply had to take out every chameleon they saw.

“If Paralyze Shout works, then the paralysis items Iz gave oughtta work, too. I’ll throw those around—you focus on flying.”

With Maple’s MP, she couldn’t actually activate Paralyze Shout at all. Slotted skills, however, could be used a few times a day without MP.

But each use meant one less time she could bust out Hydra.

“We wanna clear this tower today, right? Gotta be stingy!”

“Yeah, but...we may have to turn back before clearing that last floor.”

“Oh, right. They said that boss is crazy strong.”

“I’d rather not lose.”

“Then let’s get this floor over with!”

Again, Maple used her guns to rocket through the trees, while Sally used her webs to fine-tune their flight path.

Sally was regularly chomping on chameleon-detection fruit, helping Maple navigate.

The chameleons were pretty fast on their feet, but both girls were fairly mobile when they wanted to be; once they were in the area, not many attacks hit them.

They were steadily whittling down the total numbers. The chameleon icons showing up when Sally chomped a fruit were down to ten.

Still...

“W-we’re not have much luck finding the real one...”

“Where *is* it? Maple! Right, right!”

“Huh? Where? Where?”

Sally had chameleon detection active, and in that ten-second window, she’d spotted an icon hovering where nothing was.

She pulled two invisibility toggles out of her inventory and shoved one in Maple’s mouth. And lo and behold—the one *visible* chameleon stood before them.

“That’s gotta be the one!”

“But it’s already running!”

“Don’t worry! I’ve got this.”

Maple’s mode of flight wasn’t really great at stopping on a dime, so she landed by...crashing into a tree.

Sally dropped the webbing and dashed after the chameleon.

“Superspeed! You aren’t getting away—Leap!”

The chameleon was using its tongue to swing from a branch, but she vaulted to it, daggers brandished. It let out a cry—and moved no more, shattering into light.

“S-Sally! You okay?”

Maple came pushing through the brush, and there was a rustle in the branches overhead. The forest moved with a will of its own—and opened up a path.

There was a column of light ahead. Definitely a magic circle at the base.

“Another notch in my belt.”

“Noice. Kind of a nerve-racking fight, but we got through.”

“Your defense played a big part of that, and we didn’t have to worry about the dungeon itself.”

“Should we hit up the next floor, then?”

“Absolutely.”

They headed toward the magic circle and hopped on together.



Defense Build and Tower's Ninth Floor

Wondering what the next floor and boss would have in store for them, they found themselves beneath a starry sky.

Only one problem—they were *in* that sky, in an active free fall.

“Um...?”

“Huh...?”

They glanced at each other. It was a long way to the ground below.

““What the—?!””

They were gaining speed. Sally started yelling.

“Maple! Call Syrup!”

“Oh! Right!”

Maple tried to summon her turtle—but the skill wouldn't activate. Neither would Sally's Web Spinner.

“W-we can't do *anything*!”

“This fall is mandatory?!”

There was nothing to do but grin and bear it, but eventually their fall slowed—and they stopped in midair.

“We're floating?”

“Seems like.”

Relaxing a little, they scanned the area. All around them were star-shaped platforms, each glittering with an internal light.

Their bodies were glowing with a similar light—likely what allowed them to hover.

“Look, Maple. There's a buff on us. Stellar Force? Only lasts two minutes...but

if we stand on one of those star platforms, it'll reup."

Stellar Force

Two-minute duration. While active, players will float in midair.

Will reapply if you stand on a ninth-floor star-shaped platform for twenty seconds.

"So we have to regularly rest to avoid a fall?"

"And our skills are back online. We have to assume this is a combat zone."

"Cool. Syrup, you're back!"

Maple could turn Syrup giant and fly around on him—a big advantage.

And Sally could web herself to Syrup if she needed a quick escape.

As if it had been waiting for the girls to get ready, a change swept over the sky. A gleaming white star fell slowly from above, stopping in front of them. As they watched carefully, it burst, light streaming in all directions—and creating paths of little stars. They went up, down, all around like skipping stones, passing by the platforms that could reapply Stellar Force. A lot of new paths to follow.

"Looks like we can walk on these!"

"So we *don't* need to float around?"

"Not right now. We don't wanna fall if Stellar Force wears off, so it'd be a good idea to keep Syrup hovering nearby."

"You got it!"

Before going anywhere, they had to know if they'd fall through.

Stellar Force wore off soon enough—and they slipped right through the glowing path, falling.

"Whoops!"

Sally webbed Syrup quickly, pulling them back up. These roads clearly required Stellar Force.

They went back to the nearest star platform and waited for the buff to reup.

“Looks like we’ve gotta pick routes that’ll get us to another platform in time.”

“But even if we don’t follow the paths, the buff lets us float.”

“Hmm. Mind if we linger a bit longer?”

“Sure. As long as we’re here, there’s no risk of falling!”

They waited a while at their starting location, and eventually a shower of gleaming stars came from the back, swallowing up the star paths and leaving nothing behind.

Once again, a single star fell from above, making new paths.

“Time limited?”

“Yeah. And if we’re *just* hovering, we go that much slower. I bet we wouldn’t make it.”

Syrup flight probably wouldn’t get them there, either. But they had a trick that could get them places far faster.

“Wanna rocket it?”

“Eh-heh-heh. You sure know me.”

“I’m down. This Stellar Force stuff makes it easier to adjust trajectory.”

Deciding to ignore the paths entirely, they waited for the next cycle—just in case—then blasted skyward.

“...! These roads go pretty far!”

“Urgh, will I have enough fuel?”

There was a limit to how many weapons Machine God could make. If she kept destroying them, she’d eventually run out.

Maple blew up another batch of weapons, accelerating again.

Sally was keeping an eye out, and she soon spotted something.

“Maple! Stars are falling on us!”

“We’ve got Martyr’s Devotion! It’ll be fine!”

But just to be sure, Maple activated Pierce Guard, too. Belching smoke and

fire in their wake, she tried to outdistance the falling stars, but one hit them, and the knockback sent her spinning toward the starry path.

“Ugh...”

“Aim for that star platform! We’ll need to reup Stellar Force to control your flight.”

Sally planned to act as brakes, helping them avoid future star strikes. Once the buff was active, they took to the skies once more.

They could see a bunch of defensive traps waiting on the starry path, but that wasn’t a problem for them.

Sally had figured out the timing on the falling stars and was dodging smoothly or making Maple stop. They reached the finish line with plenty of fuel to spare.

The goalpost was a door that sparkled like concentrated moons and stars. It was just hanging there in the sky, and they could go all around it. Clearly, opening it would lead them to an entirely different location.

“Come on, come on! That door might vanish on us, too!”

“Yeah, definitely don’t wanna have to start over.”

Not wanting to accidentally run out of time, they opened the door and entered.

Once inside, the door itself vanished. Before them were a number of star-shaped platforms arranged in a circle around the sky.

“Something’s coming.”

“Yup, I see it.”

From the glittering night sky came a thick black cylinder, wide enough that the two of them together could not get their hands around it. It extended two arms, each ten yards long, with claws.

There was a snap as it freed itself from the sky. Two lights glowed—eyes? They *might* be on a face. Below the lights, the creature *split*, and a cannon boomed.

This was *clearly* no trash mob, and they were taking it seriously.

“The boss?”

“No doubt!”

Unlike the eighth floor, the boss itself didn’t seem to have any weird tricks. There was a perfectly normal HP bar over its head. The girls braced for a fierce battle.

“First strike!”

“Take us right to the thing!”

There was nothing in the way this time. With Maple’s rockets, they didn’t even need Stellar Force. Giving Sally a ride, she had them right before the boss’s eyes in one second flat.

But the boss wasn’t about to just take that lying down. It swept an arm, trying to knock Maple aside.

“Hokay!”

She twisted herself and got her shield up, blocking it. Devour did damage, but she was still sent flying.

“Major knockback!”

“But not piercing, so we’re good!”

They hadn’t lost *that* much ground and were relieved by the lack of damage. They picked themselves back up.

“Full Deploy! Commence Assault!”

“—Wait!”

“Huh?”

Just as Maple was about to start firing, they stopped glowing—and started falling.

“I’ve got us!” Sally said, pulling the line connecting her and Maple. She created a transparent foothold beneath her—at the cost of a stat penalty. She then hopped across a series of these to the nearest star platform.

“Whew. If that fall was set to instakill, even you’d be a goner. Be careful!”

“M-mm. I guess it *was* two minutes.”

“Incoming!”

“Er, um...oh! Heavy Body!”

Since her STR was less than her VIT, this effectively immobilized her, but for the next minute, she nulled all knockback.

This skill would allow her to keep Martyr’s Devotion in place with no risk of being knocked away.

“Good thinking!”

“Eh-heh-heh! Mii was nice enough to tell me about it, so I’d better remember to make good use of it.”

“Don’t wanna overextend ourselves and get caught by surprise—we’d better watch and wait. Let’s bring Syrup closer to us.”

“Gotcha.”

“If you’re good, I’ll go in and attack. I should be able to dodge that, so it’s better if it’s aggroed on me.”

Maple had been blowing herself up two floors in a row, so she didn’t actually have many guns left. It was best they keep those in case of falls and let Sally take the lead with airwalking and her webs.

“Careful!”

“Always. Don’t fall off!”

“I-I’ll do what I can...”

Sally released the lifeweb connecting them and danced off through the air, starting to get the hang of this kind of movement. The buff’s floaty motions weren’t that quick, so she’d have to predict attacks carefully.

“If I keep it on me, Maple should be able to land a Hydra. Oboro! Awaken!”

She called out her pet fox and let it ride her shoulder as she moved in.

“With a target this big... Wind Cutter!”

To get the boss’s attention off Maple and onto her, she shot out a quick spell.

It hit the boss and did a tiny scrap of damage.

And the boss swung round, hurling a black blade her way.

“Hngg, a type-matched counter?”

Naturally, an attack that feeble wasn’t about to hit her. She made the dodge look effortless. She hit it with a few more spells, verifying the counter’s range.

And got the distinct impression Maple would have to be careful here.

“It’s copying all my attacks! They might have knockback added—think before you shoot!”

“I hear you!”

Since there hadn’t been anything to dodge on the floor below, Sally’s Sword Dance was still not up to speed. The boss was an HP sponge, and given how little damage she was doing, it had plenty of defense, too.

Maple was well aware they’d need her doing damage, too.

“But without anywhere to stand... Hmm. Oh, I know!”

She tapped her palm with her other fist, a brilliant idea in mind.

While Maple was scheming, Sally was chipping away.

When she stuck to ranged attacks, the black frame extended thornlike things along with the counters, but to her, all that did was power up the Sword Dance buff faster.

“Still, this is a *lot* of HP. And if I push my luck, I’ll miss a dodge... Whoops!”

She wafted herself up above a sideways slash and settled onto a nearby platform.

“Whew... Hmm?”

Before she figured out her next attack, she spotted Syrup on the other side of the boss.

“Whoa, what is *that*?”

Syrup was floating in a pillar of light, at the center of which was Maple—on her throne. She was flanked by shields hugging her sides, and Night’s Facsimile

was pointing dead ahead.

Large cannons were aimed between the gaps, and Maple herself was wearing a green dress and crown, looking very confident.

“Commence Assault! Poltergeist! Syrup, Spirit Cannon!”

Lasers fired out of the four cannons surrounding the shields and from Syrup’s mouth, scorching the boss. Maple then swung the lasers, attacking the boss as it tried to dodge. This provoked a counter, and Maple was moving too slow to dodge.

Five black lasers hit home, shattering her cannons.

She took no damage but lost more of her few remaining weapons.

“Hngg, Poltergeist didn’t really do much. That’s not worth it if my guns break...”

Maple had been hoping that manipulating the lasers would draw the target away and result in less breakage, but it hadn’t really worked out. The boss soon turned back to Sally, and since Maple no longer had to worry about knockback, she got up off her throne and hit it with Night’s Facsimile.

Red sparks flew, and it countered, but Heavy Body was still active and negated the knockback.

She had Syrup fly her away again.

“This way I don’t *need* to go anywhere!”

“Smart!” Sally called, hopping around platforms down below and dodging the boss’s claws.

Maple thought for a minute, then had Syrup hover right over Sally.

“Martyr’s Devotion works above *and* below! I can keep you safe from up here!”

“Rad! Thanks!”

Even if Sally did accidentally take a hit, Maple would null it.

And Maple had three shields surrounding her throne so that no blows could get through. That throne was reducing damage *and* healing. She also took out

some of Iz's handmade potions and put them by her feet, ready to defend against anything.

"I've just gotta remember when to use Pierce Guard...and Meditation!"

Maple was learning more and more skills, and that meant more things to remember. Feeling like she'd never get used to all of them, she heard Sally down below using even *more* skills.

"Hngg, but while I'm sitting down, I can't use many attacks. Hyah!"

She picked up one of the paralysis items and threw it out before the gap in her shields.

She'd been flying very close, so that even if it did knock her back, it wouldn't be a problem. From this range, even Maple couldn't miss, and the item shattered, scattering a yellow glow.

"It's working! In that case... Hey!"

Maple took a bunch more stuff out of her inventory and started hurling away, as the boss's big arms hammered on her sides and head.

Each item didn't do a lot, but since she was ignoring threats and attacks and hurling away, it added up.

"Okay! It's paralyzed!"

"Thanks! Now I can go all out!"

Sally popped a Doping Seed to boost her STR and did as much damage as she could while the paralysis was blocking that counter.

The status effect wore off as the HP hit 70 percent, and the boss sluggishly started moving again, howling.

"Dropping back!"

"Okay! I'll stick with you!"

Sally landed on a distant platform, making sure she and Maple were moving together.

The boss was still howling—and the sky began to change.

Shooting stars started falling, trailing tails of fire. They hit the star platforms, shattering them.

“Ugh, that’s just mean...”

“What now, Sally? Hop aboard?”

Maple came down to her level, parking Syrup alongside.

“There’re still several platforms on the other side, so just gimme a ride over there. I’m safe as long as I’m with you.”

“Coming right up! Get on before it starts attacking!”

“Mm. Still, this thing’s dang tough. I thought we did more than *that*.”

“True.”

They made it to the other side before the howling stopped.

“I’ll be up above you!”

“You do that.”

Maple dropped Sally off and began climbing again.

The howl ended, and the boss slashed at Sally with those claws, but she dodged and sliced its arm.

“It’s upped the number of counters...!”

Sensing danger behind her, she dove forward, speeding up.

Several black thorns split the space she’d just vacated.

“At least they’re visible? And I can still evade ’em.”

Sally stayed close to the boss, landing dagger strikes.

In response, the boss began deploying huge magic circles—one of them right underneath her feet.

“Too big...!” Sally said, bracing herself to run.

“Don’t worry! Just keep attacking!” Maple cried. She stood poised to use Pierce Guard and made sure Sally was inside Martyr’s Devotion.

“Okay, then...”

Jet-black torrents gushed out of every magic circle. Clearly a powerful attack, but with Maple's skill negating piercing damage, nothing could hurt them.

Leaving all defense to Maple, Sally simply jumped out of the torrent, her body spinning into a dagger slash.

"Cool!"

She dodged the counters, and her Sword Dance buff reached the next level, boosting her damage again.

By aggressively closing in on the offense, she was forcing it to counter and turning all those counters to her advantage.

And since they could handle them just fine, the gushing torrents were just a perk.

Generating them left it wide open to attack, and Sally could land a full combo and get back to a star platform before Stellar Force wore off.

"I'd better join in! Commence Assault! Syrup, Spirit Cannon!"

Maple started firing her lasers again, and Syrup's attack added to the damage done. Counters flew at them, but this time, she was moving her shield to keep her weapons from breaking. It was *far* preferable for the blows to hit Maple herself.

"Good, let's keep this up!"

Maple got off her throne, removing the seal on her skills.

"Saturating Chaos! Hydra!"

The throne reduced incoming damage and granted an autoheal effect but locked access to some of her biggest attacks. A torrent of poison and a monstrous maw hit the boss, and each knocked out a chunk of HP.

"Yeah, those worked pretty well... Yiiiikes!"

But hitting this boss hard meant those same attacks came back at her.

She hadn't yet made a habit of using it, so the black torrent hit her before she could get Heavy Body out—and she was thrown skyward.

Since she'd been on Syrup all this time, Stellar Force was no longer active.

“.....!”

“Whoa, close one.”

“Sally!”

Sally had spotted the light of Martyr’s Devotion moving away, busted out Superspeed, caught up with Maple, and grabbed her as she fell, landing on a platform nearby.

“Thanks, I thought I was done for.”

“Let’s get you back on Syrup. I’ll draw the boss away, so you can hop on board without using your guns.”

“Sure thing!”

“Okay, Oboro! Shadow Clone!”

Good to her word, she used her pet’s powers and made her offense even more relentless.

There were now *five* Sallys headed toward the boss.

And all of them dodged its arm swings, new black lasers, and even surprise attacks from behind.

As Sally’s damage piled up, it lost interest in Maple, allowing her to use Stellar Force to hover back up to Syrup.

“Heavy Body, Pierce Guard, Crystallization, and... Hngg, I’ve gotta talk to Sally about how to better use skills. For now...Full Deploy! Commence Assault!”

Maple was a long way from fully mastering her range of skills, so she decided to stick to what she knew.

This boss had a lot of HP, but with its counters and AOE’s doing nothing, it was clearly at a disadvantage.

Sally’s Sword Dance was at peak buff, and now they just had to keep up the pressure.

“Only...thirty percent left!”

“Hydra!”

Maple repeated her big attack, and with Sally's affliction effect, the poison status finally took hold, steadily draining the remaining health.

But even that had only gotten them just below 30 percent.

"Bet it's got a new phase! Watch out!"

"Okay!"

They both braced themselves—and the boss sprouted a *second* pair of arms.

Meteors began falling, black flames billowing behind.

Aimed directly at the girls.

"Looks like we're the targets!"

"I got us covered!"

Maple moved two shields overhead, and a meteor hit them.

"Gah?!"

The rock itself smashed against her shield, but the flames came around it, coating Maple herself. It did no damage, but it extended the cooldowns on all Maple's skills. Since that was how she attacked, this was not good.

"S-sorry, Sally! We can't let these hit us."

"Gotcha...but no time to talk about it!"

With four arms and those counters, Sally could close in only when she was *sure* she could dodge it all. This left her peppering it with weaker spells from a safe distance.

"Whew...yeah, size equals strength."

But she still spotted a gap that left her room to dodge, and she cut her way in.

She couldn't let it hit her.

No matter how much damage Sally did, the meteors were still going for Maple, and she was too busy trying to dodge those to keep herself positioned over Sally.

"Right under me!"

A magic circle spawned beneath her feet, and Sally dove off, slashed the boss in passing, and was out behind it.

She was headed to reup Stellar Force when it howled again, and the star platforms were enveloped in black flames.

“—Uh-oh!”

“Syrup, Mother Nature!”

Maple’s cry echoed, and massive vines extended in Sally’s direction.

Catching her intent, Sally ducked under a swinging arm, then ran up the vine to Maple’s side.

“Thanks, you *really* saved me that time.”

“Eh-heh-heh, you’re welcome!”

With Sally’s HP, she couldn’t afford to soak damage while she waited for Stellar Force to recharge.

“If you can throw that out on the fly, you oughtta get used to Heavy Body soon enough.”

“That only worked out in time because I happened to be looking right at you!”

“Well, I’m here until those platforms go back to normal.”

“That’s fine! Appreciate it if you could Heal me.”

“No prob. Only time I really use that spell...”

Inside the domain of Martyr’s Devotion, as long as Maple was safe, so was Sally.

For a while, they held their ground on Syrup’s back. At last the platform fires died down.

“If you yell, I’ll bail you out again. Go hurt this thing! I’m outta Machine God *and* Hydra, so...”

“On it. Honestly, as tanky as this thing is, anyone who can hurt it is pretty dangerous.”

Sally dropped down to a platform, got her glow again, and headed back into

the breach.

“We’ve still got one floor left—I don’t wanna have to restart this fight!”

Once was *plenty*. Sally kicked off the platform, dancing through the air.

Maple was holding fast above her, so she could rack up damage without worrying about the boss’s attacks.

With no need to break her flurry to evade, she could make full use of her combo skills.

“That definitely hits harder!”

As fast as her twin daggers hit, this slow, bulky boss could not get away.

And they’d figured out what to do if it removed the platforms—the phase shifts were no longer fatal.

“Triple Slash!”

“Saturating Chaos!”

Their last attacks struck home, and the boss’s HP hit 0. Its body turned white and exploded into light.

Maple had Syrup drop down so Sally could hop aboard.

“Now we just have the tenth floor!”

“Whew. Wanna call it a day?”

“Yeah, the next one’s supposed to be real tough... I’d better have my skills back.”

“Yup. Let’s just try to take it out on our first attempt!”

“Sure! That sounds fun.”

They would be ready to enter the final fight in peak condition.

821 Name: Anonymous Greatsworder

People starting to beat this thing?

I heard the Order already did.

822 Name: Anonymous Spear Master

I'm still stuck on nine.

The gimmick means our front-liners need to secure AGI-boosting gear, so haven't been able to clear it.

823 Name: Anonymous Mage

You people are burning through stuff. We're still on the sixth-floor boss.

That thing's physical hits are rough.

We *almost* got it, but...

824 Name: Anonymous Great Shielder

The Order is already through?

I heard they were only running four, so damn.

I'm stuck on the tenth-floor boss.

Anything that can dodge our main DPS leaves us hosed.

825 Name: Anonymous Archer

How are Maple and Sally doing?

826 Name: Anonymous Great Shielder

They only just reached the tenth floor.

But neither of them have taken damage from any monsters so far.

827 Name: Anonymous Greatsworder

So they're still broken as hell.

828 Name: Anonymous Spear Master

Piercing damage not exactly in short supply...

Guess they're playing their cards right.

829 Name: Anonymous Archer

Another of Maple's weaknesses eliminated.

830 Name: Anonymous Great Shielder

She did take some terrain damage.

Got her feet wet while admiring the lava.

831 Name: Anonymous Mage

I hope that part of her never changes.

832 Name: Anonymous Greatsworder

The changes in scenery do keep the tower varied.

If I had the defense to stop and soak it in, I might have more fun with it.

833 Name: Anonymous Spear Master

The terrain is the tower's MVP.

834 Name: Anonymous Archer

They can't exactly put piercing attacks on *every* boss...

And they wouldn't win anyway.

835 Name: Anonymous Mage

If you wanna beat Maple, prepare a breathtaking view and piercing attacks from below or behind.

836 Name: Anonymous Spear Master

Won't work if Sally's with her.

837 Name: Anonymous Great Shielder

I think getting anywhere in that tower with a party of two is pretty nuts.
Anyone else would get chewed up and spit out on floor one.

838 Name: Anonymous Archer

They cover each other's deficiencies.

Maple's situational judgment is still a bit wobbly.

But Maple's AOE cover handles anything Sally can't dodge.

839 Name: Anonymous Greatsworder

I doubt Maple could have made it through floor six solo.

Which I guess means there are things she can't do!

840 Name: Anonymous Mage She seems capable of anything, but her skills are pretty spiky, and there's stuff we can all do that she can't.

841 Name: Anonymous Great Shielder

But no telling if that'll be true the next time you see her.

842 Name: Anonymous Spear Master

Yup.

843 Name: Anonymous Archer

Anytime I see something wild happening, I'm like, "Is that Maple?"

844 Name: Anonymous Greatsworder

I know!

Sometimes it's a boss instead.

845 Name: Anonymous Great Shielder

She may not even *look* human.

846 Name: Anonymous Mage

Let's hope they can handle floor ten.

Get themselves some good new skills.

847 Name: Anonymous Greatsword

That tenth floor is *brutal*.

Blissfully unaware of the forum cheering for them, Maple and Sally headed to the final floor.



Defense Build and Tower's Tenth Floor

The next day, with skills like Sally's Shed Skin and Maple's Machine God fully restocked, they were back in the tower.

"Let's finish this off today!"

"You know it. The event time limit isn't far off! We can only make so many runs a day."

Most of Maple's skills had daily limits.

This wasn't ideal for hammering away at tough bosses.

"First stop, floor nine!"

On that floor, they stood before the magic circle, running their final checks. Sally had taken time to get her DPS buff skill, Sword Dance, to maximum strength. Iz had stocked them up on Doping Seeds, and all their limited-use skills were fully stocked. They had no clue what was waiting for them, so Maple wasn't even firing up Martyr's Devotion until they had a better idea.

And at last, they stepped onto the tenth floor.

The light faded out, and the view faded in.

No dungeons here—instead, they found a chamber made of stone with shafts of light filtering in. A domed ceiling over the circular interior, no paths leading in or out. Something stood beneath the sunbeam, clad in a silver suit of armor. The armor itself was unadorned, and the sword in its hand looked like nothing special.

"So...ordinary..."

"Part of the trick? The others still haven't won."

The boss's features was hidden behind a full-face helm, but its hostility was evident; it had drawn that battle-dinged sword and was headed their way.

"Guess it's on."

“Mm!”

Maple raised her shield—and the boss *lunged*, closing the gap.

She quickly swung her shield into the strike, but the boss swung around *that*, hitting Maple herself.

“Whoa!”

“Maple!”

With a sound like thunder, Maple slammed into the wall, raising a cloud of dust.

And before Sally had a chance to check her HP—the boss was swinging at *her*.

“—.....Hngg!”

She dodged by a hairbreadth and stabbed back.

But the boss caught that strike on its blade, and it did next to no damage.

This armored foe was always moving in—when Sally tried to backstep out, it kept up, swinging at her.

“Cover Move! Cover!”

Maple got between them just in time. Devour swallowed up the sword and a chunk of the body.



“Nice!”

That opening was all Sally needed; she darted around Maple, slashed the boss’s side in passing, and slipped out behind it.

But the boss didn’t care—it just flanked Maple’s shield, unloading a high-speed combo on her unguarded right.

“Full Deploy! Commence Assault!”

Maple quickly got her guns out and unloaded them in its face.

This was definitely carving away at its health, but not slowing it down.

Maple kept up the barrage, trying to get it to stop hitting her—and a spurt of flames emerged from beneath the armor. The boss vanished.

“Um?!”

“Maple! Behind you!”

At Sally’s voice, Maple tried to turn and found a sword dropping like a guillotine. She instinctively raised Night’s Facsimile. There was a shock wave—and it split in two.

The attack didn’t stop there, either. It swung up, then down, then thrust forward, destroying Maple’s artillery and finally piercing Maple herself—her HP dropped *hard*.

If she’d soaked the whole combo directly, she’d be dead already.

“Urgh...!”

“Maple, over here!”

Sally shot out her webs and yanked Maple toward her. The next attack caught air, and the boss paused, blade held high, glaring at them.

“Heal!”

“Urgh, thanks...but I actually took damage...”

“What’s done is done. Let’s just make sure we beat this thing in one go.”

“Right! Refocus!”

“I’m gonna try and slow this thing down. You try not to get hit again.”

This boss was all about relentless strikes and an impenetrable guard. Even Sally had almost no way to get in a hit. One-on-one, she’d find herself slowly but surely losing ground. They had to find a way for Maple to get in some solid hits.

So Sally charged in close, catching its sword on her twin daggers and deflecting the strike.

“Oboro, Awaken! Bog Wisp! Oceanic! Ancient Ocean!”

Oboro unleashed blue fire, and Sally’s water skill soaked the boss. Both skills served to reduce the target’s AGI, and the fish Ancient Ocean generated *also* splashed AGI-debuff water all over.

It slowed down a little; Sally deemed it *just* enough that she’d be a match for it.

“Ack!”

She’d ducked under a horizontal swing, but before she could recover, it shifted into a three-strike combo.

Sally’s eyes went wide. She tried to dodge, but all three strikes hit home.

And she vanished. The real Sally appeared *behind* the boss.

“Double Slash!”

Not letting this opening go to waste, she activated a powerful skill, then retreated back to Maple.

“If I hadn’t been using Mirage, it’d have gotten me.”

“...Um, let’s get Martyr’s Devotion going.”

“But if we do...”

“It’s okay! I don’t wanna take damage at all, but we need you safe! And I wanna win!”

“You can drop it if you’re in trouble!”

“Will do!”

Maple activated Martyr's Devotion and Heaven's Throne, then used Inspire to give Sally a boost.

"We've gotta keep your skills in reserve till it shifts phases."

"Good luck, Sally!"

"Mm, I got this!"

Sally turned back to the boss as it charged in, thrusting her daggers forward. If she didn't even try to dodge, the boss didn't block—her strikes actually hit.

Abandoning all evasion, she focused solely on doing as much damage as she could.

"Ugh...argh! Meditation!"

Maple was soaking all these strikes for Sally, but since Heaven's Throne was drastically reducing the incoming damage, it had taken off only about 30 percent of Maple's health.

She added a second recovery skill and took a potion to keep herself topped up.

"I'm gonna hurt this boss as much as it hurts you!"

Sally took one step back and then moved in to strike again. Since Maple wasn't getting hit herself, she had plenty of time to sip potions.

This was not normally an enemy you could brawl with head-on and survive, but with these two, they could rack up some decent damage.

"Triple Slash!"

The boss's three-strike combo ripped into Sally, and her own combo sent sparks flying from its armor.

"We're going all out and still only at twenty percent?"

"I'm fine! I got plenty of Iz's potions!"

"Argh, and its movements are so simplistic!"

The boss's move set consisted of nothing more than a basic combo, some swift follow-up attacks, and regular flanking maneuvers. No weird gimmicky

stunts, just sheer raw strength that was wearing her down.

Sally was sure it would add more tricks as the fight went on, but she was already at her limit.

“My DPS is as good as it gets, too!”

The blue aura of Sword Dance was at its brightest, and each time her daggers struck the boss’s sword, sparks flew.

She threw in a spell to make it flinch, but the boss dodged it—like Sally would.

“...Maple’s Hydra might not land.”

Sally’s brain was spinning, trying to think of how they could hurt this thing more before the phase shift. Most of Maple’s moves were single big attacks, and if it evaded any one of them completely, their total potential damage would drop significantly.

And if the boss’s DPS got any boosts, their current strategy would fall apart.

“Whew...Oboro, Shadow Clone!”

Splitting herself, Sally had them all lay into it. In response, the boss’s blade gleamed, and it went into a spin, hacking all the clones. Sally herself managed a backstep in time, but her expression was grim. She was quickly making a mental list of skills they could use and skills it would thwart, then merging that list with Maple’s skills and looking for a valid approach.

“Okay. Maple! I’ve got a plan to hurt this thing, so listen closely. Once I’m done talking, I’ll just carve away till the next phase hits.”

“Gotcha!”

Raining down blows, Sally filled in Maple on her plan. Maple got her head wrapped around the skills she’d need and the timing to use them.

“Okay! I’ve got it!”

“Then...Triple Slash!”

Sally’s daggers took out one last chunk, putting it below the 70-percent mark and forcing it into the next phase.

The boss swung wide and jumped back, running its hand down the length of

the blade. Flames sprang up from it, billowing in the sword's wake.

"Maple, I'm gonna watch a bit. You focus on healing just in case!"

"Will do."

The boss swung the sword, shooting flames out before it—then it charged at Sally.

Sally dodged the flying flames and caught the sword on her daggers. Fire spurted across Maple's armor, doing damage.

"Ack...!"

"Burn damage there, too?"

Sally stopped blocking blows, focusing on dodging, trying to reduce Maple's damage. But every attack the boss did was enhanced with fire, and if her dodges were even a moment too late, she'd get burned. She needed to keep her distance to avoid getting caught.

"This thing's got even *less* openings!"

If she backed off too far, it started flinging flame blades at her. That prevented Maple from bringing out Syrup. But seeing its movements otherwise unchanged, Sally gave the order.

"Okay, Maple! On the offense!"

"Gotcha!"

While Sally was being aggressive and pulling the boss's aggro, Maple deployed her weapons and blasted off, getting in close.

"Zone Freeze!"

There was an audible snap, and the ground around Maple froze. The boss had its feet on that ground, and the freeze spread up them, immobilizing it for three full seconds.

"Power Attack!"

"Hydra! Saturating Chaos! Predators!"

In that brief time, they busted out attacks that left them exposed or were

easily dodged. The Predators' attacks lowered the boss's stats some more, but three seconds was not very long, and already the boss was moving again.

And as they tried to back off—the boss stuck its sword in the ground.

A massive red magic circle appeared, centered on the armored boss.

"Crap...!"

"Atrocity!"

Maple's cry rang out just as a ginormous pillar of fire erupted from the ground.

When the flames died down, Sally was unharmed—but the Atrocity body was crumbling away, dumping Maple back in front of her. Sally picked her up and put some distance between them and the boss. At least it seemed like that big spell left it frozen for a moment, but they were in no state to take advantage of it.

"That was *too* close."

"Sorry, didn't think it had that up its sleeve."

"Going all in on offense might be too risky. I can't use Atrocity again..."

"Better not use Martyr's Devotion anymore. An AOE like that will take you down before your healing kicks in."

"Mm, you'll have to dodge, though!"

"Leave that to me. It's kinda my thing."

Maple redeployed her guns and hefted her shield. Sally raised her daggers and refocused.

"Let's go, Maple! Phantom World!"

"Commence Assault!"

There were now *three* Maples, heavily armed and riddling the boss with an incredible number of rounds. She was far enough away that its spin attack could not eliminate her clones, so it threw up a wall of fire, defending itself.

"Argh, break that down!"

As if in answer to her prayer, the flames disappeared—but the boss was in the air, out of the barrage's path, and throwing itself at Maple.

"Pierce Guard!"

Trying to lay down as much damage as she could, Maple turned her guns up and got ready to hit it with Devour. The element on the boss's blade was even stronger, like a pillar of fire cleaving Maple and her clones.

The fire itself did damage over time, and Pierce Guard couldn't block it—but it *did* cancel out the sword strike itself, so she was still standing.

Her clones were gone, but Maple paid that no heed, swinging her shield and gouging a chunk out of the boss's shoulder and torso. A spray of red sparks went up from the armor.

"One more!"

But the flaming sword knocked away her shield, and the boss charged in after, leaving her unable to recover.

But that was Maple's *plan*.

"Sally!"

"Quintuple Slash!"

Sally had slipped away as Maple's barrage started, using Oboro's Shadow Clone to disappear completely—out of sight, out of mind—and she'd been waiting behind the boss for a chance to strike.

With Doping Seeds pushing her to her limits, she unleashed her strongest combo attack. With the extra hits provided by Chaser Blade, each hand hit ten times for a total of twenty strikes, all stabbing the boss in the back. The blade bearing down on Maple stopped—the damage it had taken was too great to ignore, and it changed up, stabbing the sword into the ground at its feet.

The magic circle appeared, ready to incinerate them up again.

"Quick Change!"

"Heal!"

"Aegis!"

Maple's alt gear gave her larger HP pools, which Sally topped up, allowing her to deploy a damage-nulling dome of light.

A move as big as the boss's—canceling the damage on an attack that should have killed them. Flames raged outside the dome's reach.

"It's open!"

"Nice!"

The spell left the boss frozen again, and this time, they were ready for it. Maple fired her guns, Sally landed a few combos, and the boss's health dropped to 30 percent.

That caused a shock wave that did no damage but knocked them both away.

Sally darted over to Maple, topped up her HP, and watched closely for the armor's next move.

Maple switched her gear back and called on Syrup to up their offensive capabilities.

"That went well!"

"But this ain't over till it's over."

The boss still had its sword in the ground. Flames gushed from it, the ground cracked, pillars of fire shot skyward, and the entire terrain was transformed. Raging fires lit up the walls and ceiling, and flames were pouring out of the chinks in its armor.

Five swords made of fire appeared in the air behind it, and the flames on its main weapon raged even higher.

"...Guess the gloves came off."

"We can take it!"

With the phase shift complete, the boss was ready to attack. All five floating blades turned toward the girls, swooping in fast. With such simplistic movements compared to what Shin from Flame Empire could do, Sally easily read their trajectories and got out of the way. Even Maple had seen attacks like this before and was able to evade them.

But there was one key difference—these swords left a fiery thread in the air behind them, reducing their movement options.

“Don’t use Cover Move! We can’t risk double damage now.”

“Yeah, I figured!”

When they dodged the last of the flaming swords, they turned in the air and came swooping back in. The fiery threads were still burning—and the boss generated five *more* swords behind it. The girls gaped.

“More?!”

“Maple! We gotta make this quick.”

“Y-yeah!”

The longer this phase lasted, the worse off they’d be. They ran toward the boss.

“Taunt! I’ll keep the swords occupied, Sally! You hit it hard!”

“Sounds good! Go!”

All ten swords were going for Maple, so Sally went after the boss alone.

“Syrup! Rampart!”

Multiple walls shot up around Maple. They soon shattered, but they managed to stop a number of the fire blades. Resigned to losing Devour, she blocked others with her shield, but three of them still ran Maple through. Syrup took a direct hit, and its HP hit 0—Maple herself had dropped to less than half her total health.

“Urgh, do your worst, Sally!”

“Oboro, Shadow Clone! Wind Cutter!”

The spell drew the boss’s guard, and the clones baited it into using the spin.

“If I know *what* it’ll do—”

One hit downed the decoy clones, and an even stronger strike cleaved Sally herself in two— Only to fade away as damage sparks sprayed from the boss itself.

She'd used Mirage as a second decoy and stabbed it from behind.

But that left her out of tricks, with the boss's flaming sword swinging her way.

"Superspeed! Come on—made it!"

She just *barely* escaped the blade's deadly reach, rolling away.

"Saturating Chaos!"

The big move was mostly to stop it pursuing Sally, so Maple followed up with another barrage.

Several bullets hit the boss and did drop its HP, but not to a fatal degree.

And it added another five flying swords.

"Roooooough!"

"Urgh, we're so close!"

All the new blades *and* the boss went for Sally. She was still assessing things calmly.

No matter how she dodged, she was gonna soak two.

"Just gotta minimize it...!"

But even as she spoke, there was an explosion, and something cut in front of her.

Several of the flying swords hit, and red sparks sprayed—but Maple had *three* shields.

"Sally! Need health!"

"Heal!"

Three shields had blocked the blows, but the flames were still burning her. Sally's Heal arrived in time to leave her hanging on by a thread.

"Zone Freeze!"

The boss was immobilized *just* as its blade was about to hit her.

Maple glanced at the boss's remaining health. It was below 20 percent, so she decided to reveal the ace up her sleeve.

“Break Core!”

A red sphere tore out of Maple, pulsing.

Five seconds till a massive explosion.

Sally saw that and moved to cut off the boss’s escape routes. Ice Pillar. Sand Wall. Normally, it would have gotten away—but she had it trapped.

“Now...it’ll hit!”

Maple’s skill activated before the boss could free itself. There was a boom, and a pillar of fire scorched the roof above. The boss’s HP dropped hard—and Indomitable Guardian kept Maple herself alive by a single point.

When the column of light faded—

The boss was still alive. Only a scrap of health left.

“?! ”

Maple gaped at it, and a magic circle appeared beneath them. Even larger than the one before.

“Wh-what do we—? Augh!”

Seeing Maple stunned, Sally darted into the air above, webbed Maple, and yanked her high.

Then she used Impact Fist to propel her even higher.

Just before the flames erupted below.

Sally made footholds in midair, kicking off them and throwing herself into the fire.

“...!”

Shed Skin kicked in, nulling the damage. She ran even faster.

Before Maple fell back into the fire, Sally made it through, her daggers raking across the boss’s throat. In that instant—the fires died away. Embers scattered—and the boss fell to the ground.

“Because you protected me—we made it in time.”

Sally sheathed her daggers—and caught Maple as she fell.

“Whew.”

“Eh-heh-heh.”

““We won!””

Both girls collapsed to the ground, breathing heavily—and gave each other a high five.

They took the magic circle out of the tower and got a message from the admins, congratulating them for conquering the tower and granting them the reward. They each got five new silver medals.

“Combined with the guild wars, that gives us ten.”

“Let’s get picking.”

“Yeah. There might be new skills!”

“Let’s meet up at the Guild Home when we’re done!”

“Sure...the fifth stratum, not the sixth?”

“...Right.”

They cashed in ten medals each and were transported to the selection zone.



A while later, Sally reached the Guild Home to find Maple waiting on the couch.

“Already done, Maple?”

“I waffled a bit but picked something obvious.”

“Yeah, we both know what we need.”

“Eh-heh-heh. Here’s what I got!”

Maple showed Sally her new skill.

Unbreakable Shield

Take only half damage for thirty seconds.

Three-minute cooldown.

“Aha. You did take a lot toward the end there.”

“I’d rather not take any, but...”

“I’ll let you know if I see anything like that. I ended up taking a skill that lets me control water.”

“Different from water magic?”

Water Wielding

Water manipulation skill. Levels I–X. Gain an additional skill at each level.

“It changes as the skill levels up, so I figured it could be fun. Good for making frozen platforms, too. So far, all it lets me do is have water appear on the ground in front of me, though.”

“Can’t wait to see where it takes you!”

As they talked, the other guild members must have seen them at home, because they all started dropping by.

Everyone looked tired but pleased with themselves—which meant only one thing.

Chrome flashed a grin. “Maple! Sally! We got through!”

“Heh-heh. So did we!”

“On our first try!”

“Wow. That takes some doing. It was pretty tough, right?”

“Fire everywhere!”

“You beat us to it? We were this close!”

“What skills did you go for?”

Maple and Sally showed off their new skills. The rest of the guild said the seventh stratum would be added soon, so they’d make their choices after clearing that.

“Then we’ll have to party up, clear the sixth-stratum boss, and hit the new

map!”

“...M-Maple...can we use the tower strat...?”

The entire sixth stratum was horror-themed, and the exit boss would almost certainly be, too. Sally could never fight it. She would have to hide inside Atrocity’s mouth.

“Mm-hmm, sure! Then we can play together again once we’re safely on the new stratum.”

“The whole guild together again! That should make it a cakewalk.”

“We’ll do our part!”

“Absolutely!”

Their next goal was clear. They were bound for the seventh stratum.



Epilogue

In due time, a patch added the seventh stratum.

Maple Tree wanted to meet up and run the dungeon to it ASAP. The eight of them gathered at the sixth-stratum Guild Home, read up on the boss's moves, and were ready to roll out.

"...Are you gonna be okay, Sally?" Kasumi asked.

Sally was flat-out on the couch, her scarf tied round her head, a deathly gaze peeking out between the folds.

"She's normally so strong..."

"We'll just have to make it quick."

They headed out of town. Maple immediately activated Atrocity.

"Sally?"

"Please."

Maple's maw opened wide, and Sally climbed in. The remaining members' faces were a sight to behold. But Sally's mind was made up.

"This is much better than me cowering in a corner," she said.

And with that, the maw closed around her.

Figuring speed was of the essence, everyone climbed onto Maple's back, and she charged them across undead-laden fields and through the dungeon itself.

With the combined might of Maple Tree, this was nothing.

And once they actually reached the boss, things got even simpler.

"Non-element attacks don't work, so we'll use these skills first."

"I pulled a good buff skill today."

"I'll stack paralysis on it!"

Their fight prep always started by buffing Mai and Yui. Maple activated Martyr's Devotion, and they got ready to paralyze the boss.

"When you're ready!"

"Mm...go get it..."

"Make it quick—for Sally!"

They opened the boss room—and found a titanic ghost within. Its hollow eye sockets shed ink-black tears. Its translucent arms dangled before it, and darkness yawned below. It was readying a magic attack. A ghoulisn sight—this was certainly far stronger than your average field boss. But the eight of them—well, presently seven—had all cleared that tower, so it wasn't very impressive.

Maple Tree was far more terrifying.

"It's paralyzed!"

Kasumi's slash applied the status effect, and Maple ran the twins forward. They jumped down.

""Here we go!""

Powerful blow after powerful blow hit the immobilized foe.

Nothing capable of withstanding that would ever be implemented here. The ghost shattered into light less than a minute after they entered the room.

"Got the drop materials."

"Then up we go! Sally, you still with us?"

Everyone looked worried. Once they were in sight of the next stratum, Maple let Sally out and canceled Atrocity.

"You okay?"

"I'm *never* going back there..."

Sally staggered upright, looking nervously out at the new stratum.

"It's gonna be different, right?"

"We think so! Let's go find out!"

Sally took a deep breath and steeled herself. They stepped into the seventh

stratum.

Before them was a vast expanse of land. Natural splendor. Monsters running across the fields.

This was where the monsters lived. Some of them were even friendly.

This was a stratum about making friends with monsters.

“Sally, does this mean...everyone can have pets like Syrup?”

“Mm-hmm. Wonder what we’ll all pick!”

“Gotta start by examining the options! This oughtta be fun.”

Excitement lifting their spirits, they set out into the new zone.

A decorative arrangement of six stylized floral or star-like symbols. Two are at the top, one is to the left of the title, one is below the title, and two are to the right of the title.

AFTERWORD

Hello to anyone who saw this book and started with Volume 7. Endless thanks to anyone who's been with me the whole time. My name is Yuumikan.

We're already at Volume 7! We've got manga and anime adaptations—and more! I still can't believe it.

And that's really been driving home how lucky I am to have these people around me. People who get what I'm doing, who know how to make the manga and novels into the best books they can. It's such a help.

So let me help back—Volume 7 is out in August, alongside the second volume of the manga. See all the expressions you can't see in prose! The manga lets you see what it's like to explore with our girls. Each and every panel is a delight. I highly recommend picking up both!

Having your work available in several formats is pure bliss.

Your support is essential, and I aim to live up to your expectations.

I look forward to meeting again in Volume 8!

Yuumikan

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